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THE WORLD'S LEADING MYSTERY MAGAZINE

February 1985
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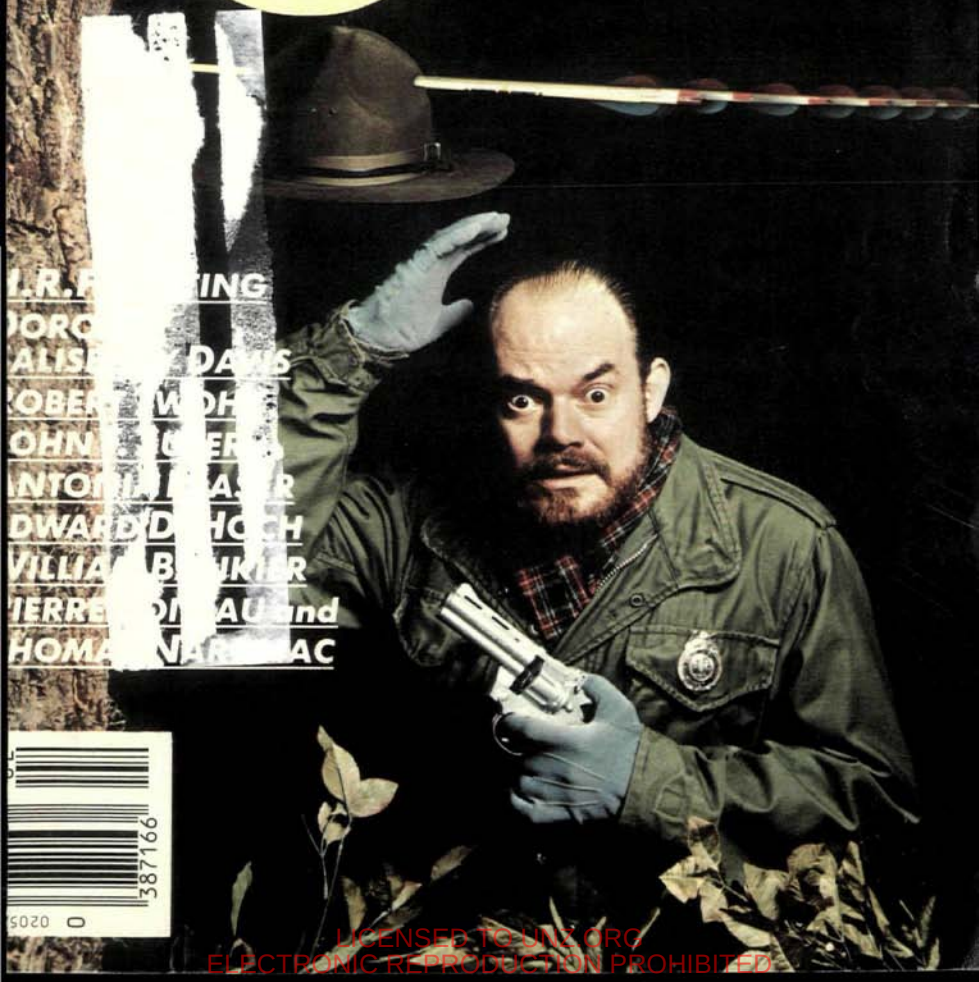

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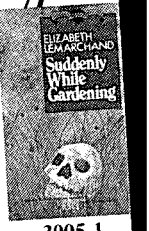


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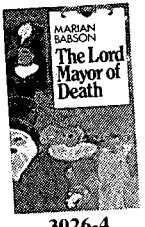


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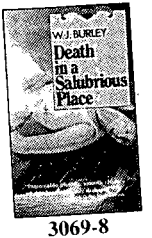


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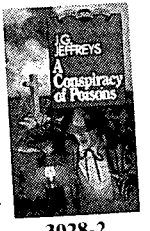


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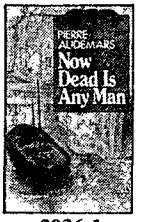


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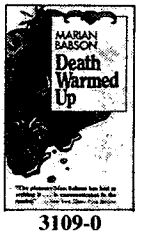


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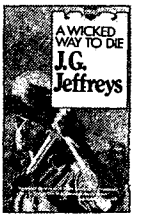


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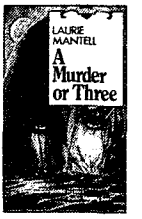


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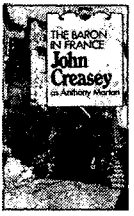


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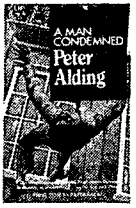


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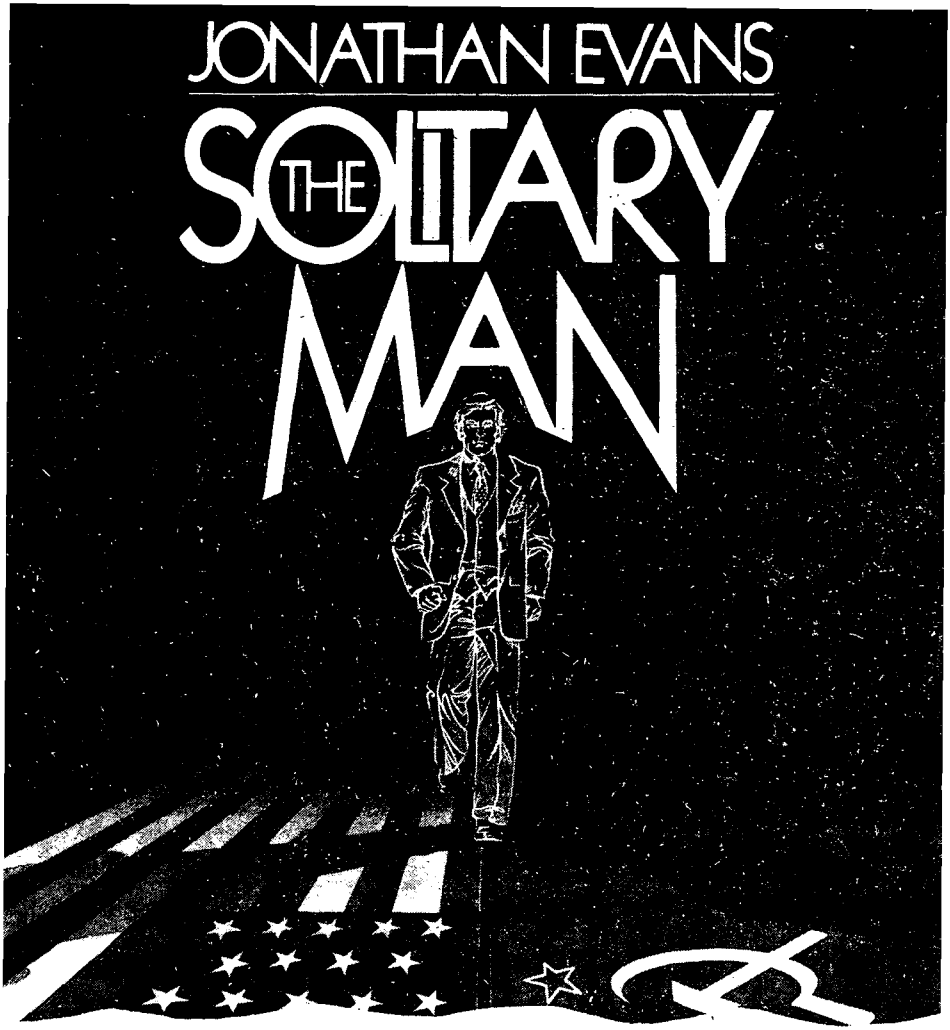


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a *NEW* Captain Leopold story by

**EDWARD D. HOCH**

*The man's name was Gregory Munday. "The thing is," Crabtree Foster said, "he's no crackpot. You listen to him for two hours over dinner and you start believing his solution to the problem of overcrowded prisons is possible. Maybe privately owned prisons are the wave of the future. But something about him bothers me . . ."*

# LEOPOLD IN NEW YORK

## *by EDWARD D. HOCH*

The game that night was in Cynthia O'Rourke's New York apartment on upper Fifth Avenue overlooking Central Park. She'd set up the card table in the center of the living room and given Crab—for Crabtree—Foster the best seat, facing the window. Cynthia had her back to the view herself, with Ron Sinclair to her left and Betty Wyle on her right.

Cynthia hadn't been on the stage for twenty years, but in Manhattan no one ever truly seemed to retire from the theater. There was always the possibility of another perfect role just around the corner. Meanwhile, her crowd still consisted of theater people like Ron—a sometime actor himself—and Betty, whose public-relations job brought her into frequent contact with the theater and entertainment industry.

Of the four, Crab Foster was the odd one. He did something with prisons in the city, or maybe the state. No one was quite sure what he did, except that he liked to hang around theater people, even has-beens like Cynthia and Ron. Or maybe he liked to hang around money. Cynthia still had some of that—enough, at least, for the frequent entertaining she liked to do. The monthly card games had

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come to be a method of relaxation for her. She enjoyed the high-stakes poker, just as she enjoyed a summer afternoon at the race track. Whether she won or lost wasn't all that important to her.

While she opened some wine and poured a Scotch and water for Crab, she heard Ron Sinclair ask him, "How was the meeting?"

"You wouldn't believe it. The fellow wants to operate a private prison for New York and Connecticut. Talk about free enterprise."

Cynthia brought them their drinks and settled down to shuffle the cards. "What's his name?"

"Gregory Munday. The thing is, he's no crackpot. You listen to him for two hours over dinner and you start believing his solution to the problem of overcrowded prisons is possible. Maybe privately owned prisons are the wave of the future. But something about him bothers me. And I wouldn't like to see prisons winding up being run by the convicts." Crab took out the small notebook he used to record bets and placed it by his left hand. The others were forever kidding him about his system for betting at poker, but he kept doing it.

"Deal the cards," Betty Wyle complained. She was an outspoken woman in her earlier forties and the youngest of the four. Cynthia liked her for her friendly brashness.

The poker game always started slow, with bets gradually escalating until they reached the hundreds by midnight. There was an unspoken rule that the host or hostess ended the game if one person seemed to be on a losing streak. They were friends, after all, and wanted to remain that way.

Just before eleven, with Cynthia ahead a few dollars, they took their usual snack break. Betty excused herself to use the bathroom and Cynthia went into the kitchen to prepare a tray of food. Crab stepped out on the terrace to admire the view of the city. Ron followed Cynthia into the kitchen and they discussed the latest plays in a dull Broadway season, then he wandered around the apartment, as usual, studying the theater books and plays that covered a full wall of the living room and overflowed into her bedroom. They were in no sort of order, held up by a haphazard collection of oriental vases and brass bookends.

As Cynthia returned to the living room with a tray of cut-up sandwiches, Betty joined them.

"Where's Crab?" she asked.

"Out on the terrace," Ron answered without looking up from a book.

"No, he isn't. The terrace is empty."

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"Crab," Cynthia sang out, "where are you? The game's starting again."

Betty stepped onto the empty terrace and peered over the railing. "Oh, my God!" she gasped, and Cynthia and Ron were at her side in an instant.

Ten stories below, a crowd had gathered on the sidewalk. A woman was screaming.

Captain Leopold had worked in New York during his early days in law enforcement, and his meeting in Manhattan with Captain Roscoe was something of a reunion. He and Roscoe had joined the force the same year and gone through police academy together, and he was surprised how little thirty-five years had changed the man. He still had a ready smile and a firm handshake, together with an ingratiating way of concealing just how smart he was. They'd spoken on the telephone several times over the years, but despite Leopold's occasional business trips to New York they'd never managed to get together until now.

"Leopold, you look great for an old man! So you went and got married again?"

Leopold nodded. "Almost a year ago now. I haven't regretted a minute of it."

"Am I going to meet her this trip?"

"I'm afraid not. Molly's a lawyer and she has a case coming up for trial today—a civil case. She got out of criminal law after we married." They were walking along lower Broadway, on their way to a luncheon meeting with a man named Gregory Munday, who owned a prison. Munday was meeting with small groups of prison officials and law-enforcement people over a period of several days in an attempt to bolster support for his scheme of a privately owned and operated prison system. Since he was interested in reaching officials in both New York and Connecticut, Roscoe had invited Leopold to drive down and sit in on a meeting.

"Here's the place." Roscoe led Leopold into a grey-stone building that seemed to be a private club.

There proved to be ten at the meeting, with Munday making the eleventh. He was a smooth-mannered man with a high forehead and bushy black eyebrows. Leopold guessed him to be in his late forties. He carried a thick briefcase of papers as if it were a real burden. "I hope you'll excuse me," he said as they settled down at the table. "My assistant was unable to join us and I have to wrestle with this

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load myself. Let's order a drink and I'll begin my speech. I promise you it's painless."

"You must be tuckered out after a week of these meetings," someone suggested.

"If I can spread my message, it's worth it. I realize this is a pioneering effort, but I think its time has come, gentlemen. One man at last night's dinner meeting, Crabtree Foster, asked some very pointed questions about—"

Captain Roscoe interrupted. "You may not have heard, sir. Foster was killed last night."

"What?"

"He fell or jumped from the terrace of a Fifth Avenue apartment. I'm handling the investigation."

"That's terrible," Munday said. He seemed genuinely upset. "Foster and I didn't agree, but he was very knowledgeable on the subject of prisons. I was hoping to win him over."

Several of the men around the table had known Foster and there was talk about his death until the drinks arrived. Then everyone settled back to listen to Gregory Munday.

"Private ownership of public facilities is not unknown in modern times," he said. "In many parts of the country there are privately owned hospitals operated as profit-making ventures. A city in the southwest even has a privately owned fire department."

"But a prison is a bit different," Leopold pointed out.

Munday had obviously taken pains to memorize all their names. "Not as different as you might think, Captain Leopold. And I think you'll agree that prisons in the New York metropolitan area and well into your state are vastly overcrowded. Even the state institutions like Attica are handling far more inmates than they should. Something must be done about the overcrowding, and the answer certainly isn't in turning more convicts loose as they were forced to do in this city last year."

"There are bills pending in Albany—" a city official began.

"Pending! Can you sit still for pending bills, and bond issues, and construction delays, and start-up costs? You know you can't. You need the space right now, and that's what I'm offering you. Fowlerville was the site of a privately owned junior college that closed down three years ago. My associates and I purchased the property and have spent several million dollars converting the dormitories and classrooms for use as a medium-security prison. The work is

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almost finished, and if your state legislatures give their approval we could begin to receive prisoners within six months."

He passed around maps of Fowlerville's location near the New York-Connecticut state line, along with photographs of the buildings.

"There's no wall around it," Roscoe pointed out.

"We're installing a double fence, twelve feet tall. Naturally we would be responsible for hiring and training all guards and other personnel. The states would simply pay us a set amount of money per prisoner for every day of incarceration. It would be enough to recover our investment, provide adequate upkeep, and make a modest profit."

Leopold considered. "You said that Mr. Foster raised numerous objections. Could you tell us some of them?"

"He was mainly interested in my backers—in who put up the money for this. Naturally, I'm prepared to make a full disclosure of that. I can assure you that none of the money comes from gambling or drugs or organized crime. Likewise, private operation would allow no more chance for favoritism or the bribing of guards than exists in the public prison system—less chance, perhaps, because our wages would be slightly above the national average for prison guards."

"You'd recruit professionals in prison management?" someone asked.

"Certainly. The man under consideration as warden has experience at the federal level."

The talk drifted on through the meal, and over dessert Gregory Munday made his final pitch. "I realize you men aren't the ones to make the final decision on this matter, but you are important law-enforcement and prison officials whose opinions carry weight in your communities. Next week I'll be in Albany and Hartford, where I hope to have bills introduced in both state legislatures."

"Do you need approval from both states?" Roscoe asked.

"We're hoping one will come through so we can begin operation in six months. The other can join us later. The political wheels move quite slowly at times and our location made it feasible to go after both states at once."

Walking back to Captain Roscoe's office, Leopold's old friend asked him, "What do you think of it?"

"He has an interesting idea. Perhaps it's the way of the future.

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But I don't think he's being realistic to expect either state to agree to something this revolutionary in a matter of months."

"My thought exactly. There are proposals for privately owned prisons pending in other parts of the country. We might be better off waiting to see how the idea works out elsewhere."

"What about this man who died? The one who had doubts about it."

"Crab Foster. He was chairman of the Governor's Council on Prison Reform. A good man. And, you know, I'm not at all satisfied with the story of his death."

"How do you mean?"

"He was playing cards with three friends at Cynthia O'Rourke's apartment. The actress."

"I don't believe I know her."

"Broadway, mostly—about twenty years ago. She never made it in the movies or TV. Nice woman."

"Married?"

"Not now. She hangs around with theater people and entertains a great deal. Don't ask me how Foster got involved with that circle. Anyway, the story is that they were playing poker and Crab stepped out on the terrace for a moment. The next thing they knew he was gone, over the railing."

"Suicide?"

"I haven't found a motive. And though the railing's a bit low for safety, I don't see it as an accident, either."

"You think he was pushed?"

Roscoe shrugged. "It's happened before."

"Sounds interesting," Leopold murmured. "I wish I could give you a hand."

"Why can't you?"

"I have to get back."

"Spend the afternoon on it, at least. You can drive back tonight."

"I don't get paid to solve crimes in Manhattan, friend."

"Listen, you help me with this one and I'll treat you to a steak dinner. How's that for getting paid?"

Leopold chuckled. "Just like the old days, I guess. Only you're not even sure there's a crime."

"Come up there with me now and take a look at the place," Roscoe said. "Tell me what you think."

Cynthia was trying to find a bookend to prop up the row of books

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next to her bed when the doorman buzzed to say that two detectives were on their way up. She was surprised to see Roscoe again so soon, and this time he had another police captain with him—named Leopold. They looked about the same age, though there was something shrewder about Leopold. She wondered why he'd been brought in on the case.

"A pleasure to meet you, Miss O'Rourke," he said with a smile that put her at ease. "Captain Roscoe tells me you're an actress."

"I doubt if you ever saw me. My greatest claim to fame was one week playing opposite Paul Newman in *Picnic*."

"That's quite a claim."

"You're here about poor Crab, aren't you?"

Roscoe nodded. "Could you go over what happened again, please, for Captain Leopold's benefit?"

"There were four of us playing poker. It's a monthly game."

"Who were the other two players?" Leopold asked.

"Ron Sinclair, an actor, and Betty Wyle. She works in public relations."

"Were all of you together when Foster went out on the terrace?"

"No. Betty was in the bathroom and I was getting some cheese and sandwiches ready in the kitchen. Ron chatted with me briefly and then went into the living room to look over my books. He does the same thing every time he's here."

"So none of you was in view of the others."

"I suppose not. But Betty came right back. It couldn't have been more than two or three minutes."

"What were you talking about during the evening?"

She told him as best she could remember, omitting nothing. When she came to the part about his dinner meeting with Gregory Munday, she saw the two detectives exchange glances. They told her to keep going, so she recounted much of the conversation during the game and the break.

"You have a good memory for details," Leopold told her.

"It's probably my training as an actress, memorizing all those lines and stage directions. Oh, here's something else I forgot last night. It's Crab's notebook. He had it on the table, keeping track of his bets. You'd better take it, Captain Roscoe."

The apartment impressed Leopold with its panoramic view of Central Park. He stepped out on the terrace, feeling as if he owned the city. As Roscoe had remarked, the railing was a little too low for safety's sake. It came just to his hips, and a good shove would have

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sent him over. But did they have any real reason for suspecting it had been murder?

The terrace ran the full width of the apartment, and he walked beyond the living-room section to the big bedroom window. He could see Cynthia O'Rourke's double bed and the bathroom beyond it. Then he stepped back a bit and glanced up. The floors above the tenth were set back, so there was a roof area above her apartment. Which meant that the killer—if there was a killer—might not have been inside the apartment at all. Someone hiding on that setback could have done it.

"Leopold?" Roscoe came from the living room. "There you are! I couldn't see you. Let's not have another accident."

"I was just checking the scene." Leopold glanced over the railing and shook his head. "It's a long drop."

"I'm going to call on Mr. Sinclair and Miss Wyle. Want to come along?"

"I wouldn't miss it."

They found Betty Wyle in her office at Creative Campaigns, a public-relations firm on Lexington Avenue. Her version of the previous night's events was virtually identical with Cynthia's.

"How long had you known Crab Foster?" Roscoe asked.

"Since the card games began. Maybe a little longer than that. A year or so."

"Did you ever see him outside of the poker games?"

"Not alone, if that's what you mean. We saw each other at Cynthia's parties, of course, and sometimes at the theater or dinner with others."

"Did you have an escort on these occasions?"

"Generally I went with Ron Sinclair."

Roscoe nodded. "Are you lovers?"

Her face flushed. "I don't think I have to answer that. Just how is it pertinent to the investigation?"

"I want to know if we can believe what you say about each other."

"You can believe it. I wouldn't help conceal a murder, if that's what you're implying. And no, we're not lovers."

"How about Cynthia O'Rourke and Mr. Foster? Were they an item?"

"I'm not answering any more questions like that," she said.

"Had there been any big losers in your poker game?" Leopold interceded.

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"You mean did Crab throw himself off the terrace because we won all his money? Hardly. The betting usually started off small. I'll admit we might have a few hundred-dollar pots before the evening was over, but we could all afford it. Crab kept track of what he bet. He told us he had a system, but he didn't seem to win or lose more than anyone else. It was a friendly game. If anyone seemed to be on a losing streak, we generally ended early."

When they left Betty Wyle's office, Roscoe took Foster's notebook out of his pocket and glanced through it. "Some sort of a betting system, I guess, with the date of each game."

"What's that he's jotted down for today's date?" Leopold asked. "Is that *Monday* or *Munday*?"

"*Munday*. All his o's are neatly closed. Besides, today's Thursday."

"*Munday—4:30 P.M. Bryant Pk. 42nd St. W Ent.* Followed by a big question mark. Interesting."

Roscoe nodded. "Bryant Park is behind the library."

"I used to work in this town, remember?" Leopold reminded him with a grin. "The west entrance is on Forty-second Street near the Avenue of the Americas."

It was Roscoe's turn to grin. "We still call it Sixth Avenue in this town. Come on—that's less than an hour from now."

"If it *is* Gregory Munday, he knows us both. We'll scare him away."

"I'll have it staked out, don't worry," Roscoe said. He stopped at a pay phone and made a call to someone back at his office. Leopold heard him issuing careful instructions. "Put Freddy on it with his radio. But get him here fast. I want everything from 4:20 to 4:40."

"Who's Freddy?" Leopold asked when he'd hung up.

"A black cop who looks like a high-school kid. You'll see."

While they were waiting for the results of the stakeout, they called on Ron Sinclair. Coincidentally, his apartment was on the other side of Bryant Park, along Fortieth Street. It was nearly 4:15 when they pressed his buzzer. He let them in but made it clear the session would have to be brief. "I've got an appointment with a producer," he said. "They might have a part for me in a revival of *Anna Christie*."

"We won't keep you long," Roscoe assured him. "This is Captain Leopold. He's assisting me in the investigation."

"What investigation? Crab fell, didn't he?"

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"That's what we're investigating. It's merely routine. Tell us about the betting. Was Foster winning or losing?"

"I think he was ahead a little when we took our break."

"And he went out on the terrace alone?"

"That's right."

"Could you see him all the time?"

"Not from the kitchen. When I returned to the living room, I guess I didn't look."

"Could anyone have been out there with him?"

"I don't see how."

"How many times would you say Foster had been to Cynthia O'Rourke's apartment?"

"I don't know. Three or four times for poker, I suppose, maybe once or twice for parties."

"Enough to be acquainted with the terrace and its low railing?"

"Sure, I guess so."

"And the man had no reason to kill himself that you know of?"

"No. —Maybe he got dizzy looking over the side. It's happened to me."

"But you didn't fall over the railing. Had he been drinking much?"

"I saw him take only one Scotch at Cynthia's, but he'd been to this dinner earlier."

"The dinner with Gregory Munday?"

"Yeah, that's the guy. Something about prisons. I didn't pay much attention."

"Tell us what he said about it."

Sinclair's account was similar to the others. Leopold remembered the phrase about letting the convicts run the prisons. Cynthia had mentioned that. There seemed to be a connection between Munday and the fatal poker game, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it.

"Look, I've really got to go," Sinclair said finally. He locked the door and went downstairs with them at exactly four-thirty.

When they'd parted on the sidewalk, Leopold asked, "Do you think he's on his way across Bryant Park?"

"Freddy'll tell us," Roscoe said. "We don't want to go near there."

Freddy Jones had arrived minutes before they reached Roscoe's office just before five o'clock. He was wearing a baseball cap, tight jeans, and a rock-star T-shirt, and looked for all the world like a street-wise kid of eighteen or so. The illusion was reinforced by a

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large stereo radio and tape-player he carried on his right shoulder like a suitcase.

"Leopold, this is Officer Freddy Jones. He's out of uniform right now."

"I can see that," said Leopold with a smile, shaking hands.

"What'd you get, Freddy?" asked Roscoe.

"You tell me. It's all here." He patted the radio.

"Does that thing really work?" Leopold asked him.

Freddy turned up the volume until the sound was almost deafening. Then he opened the back and removed a much smaller radio from inside. The rest of the interior was given over to a portable video camera of the latest design.

"I'll be damned," Leopold said.

The young policeman grinned. "I just stand on a street corner playin' my radio. I got it on my shoulder like a TV camera, only nobody thinks of that 'cause it's a radio." He opened the side of the camera and passed a video cassette to Roscoe.

"Let's see what happened at the Bryant Park entrance," Roscoe said, slipping it into the machine on top of the television set and turning on the set.

The tape suddenly replaced the start of the five o'clock news on the screen, showing the comings and goings at Bryant Park forty minutes earlier. "Busy place," Leopold commented.

"It used to be great for drug dealers, but we've cleaned it up some."

For the next nine minutes they watched a succession of unfamiliar faces. The camera had recorded sound, too, but there was only the general noise of the street, the honking and occasional shouting. One man came almost up to the camera lens to ask Freddy if he was dealing. "No, man," Freddy replied. "Go away."

Then, at what they timed to be four-thirty on the dot, Gregory Munday suddenly entered the picture from the direction of Fifth Avenue. "There he is!" Leopold said. He was dressed as they remembered him from lunch.

Munday walked up to a middle-aged dark-haired man standing with a briefcase by the steps into the park. He seemed to be asking directions, and the man pointed across the street. In the same gesture, almost too fast to see, he slipped Munday an envelope. Then Munday continued walking. After a moment, the man picked up his briefcase and walked in the opposite direction.

"There it is," Roscoe marveled. "And we've got it on tape."

"What was it?" Leopold asked. "A payoff of some sort?"

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"As soon as we identify the other guy we'll have a pretty good idea."

"How do you go about that?"

"Someone must know him. I'll get some people in here from the organized crime strike force."

For the next two hours, more than a dozen people came to view the tape. At first they only shook their heads. Nobody knew the man with the briefcase. But finally, at quarter to seven, a sergeant on the gambling detail thought the face seemed familiar. "I don't want to say. I want Lieutenant Ziegler to see it."

They had to get Ziegler away from dinner to come view the tape. "Can you pause it?" he asked when the mystery man came into view, and Roscoe pressed the appropriate button on the machine. Ziegler studied the man for another moment and then nodded. "That's him, all right."

"Who?"

"Fellow named Sam Treato. He's the money man for that new casino that just opened in Atlantic City."

"Atlantic City." Roscoe turned to Leopold. "There's casino money behind Gregory Munday's prison. They need a place to invest their profits, why not build prisons? It's the good old American way. Chances are it's even legal."

"But that tape's going to put Munday out of business," Leopold said. "There's no way the legislature would approve a private prison backed by casino money."

Roscoe agreed. "Which is why it was such a secret. Only Crab Foster found out somehow. Maybe he overheard Munday on the phone. However it was, he copied the time and place in his notebook. But that doesn't tell us who killed him, if anyone did."

"Oh, someone did, all right," Leopold assured him. "And I think you owe me a steak dinner."

Cynthia wasn't expecting any visitors that evening and she was surprised when Betty Wyle arrived. "I'm so wound up," Betty said, slipping off her jacket, "I had to talk to you about last night."

"It was terrible," Cynthia agreed. "I still can't believe it happened. Sit down and I'll get us some wine."

"Those two detectives came to see me," Betty called out, her voice following Cynthia into the kitchen. "They asked a lot of questions."

"I know. They were here too." Cynthia came back in with a plate

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of cheese and crackers, then returned to the kitchen for two glasses of Chablis.

"They can't think one of us killed poor Crab, can they?"

"Who knows what they think? Ron is upset about it, too. He phoned this afternoon."

Betty accepted the glass of wine. "I just don't understand how he could have fallen."

Cynthia sat opposite her. "Sometimes we don't know people nearly as well as we think we do. Maybe he had problems we never dreamed of."

"If they thought it was suicide, the police wouldn't be asking all these questions."

"I suppose not," Cynthia agreed.

"By the way," Betty asked, "what happened to Crab's notebook? He left it on the table when he went out on the terrace."

"I gave it to Captain Roscoe today."

"You gave—"

"It didn't belong to me, and Crab had no family. I thought the police should put it with his other effects." She squinted at Betty's face. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Yes, something is. Did—did you come here for that notebook?"

"Of course not. I told you—I came to unwind."

"But you asked about it." Cynthia frowned, remembering something else. "Months ago, in the spring, you said something about Creative Campaigns doing some public-relations work for a man who owned a prison. I just thought of that this minute. And you never mentioned it again, not even last night when Crab mentioned having dinner with that man. Was it the same person you worked for?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Crab had his doubts about that whole prison idea. You saw something in his notebook about it, didn't you? It was by his left hand, where you were sitting. That's why you came back for it tonight. You didn't have a chance to take it last night with everyone around, including the police."

"That's crazy!" Betty picked up the cheese knife but Cynthia noticed she made no move to cut a slice with it. The phone rang and as Cynthia started out of her chair, Betty said, "Don't answer that."

"My God, Betty—did you push Crab over that railing?"

"How could I have? I was in the bathroom."

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"When you come out of the bathroom, you're by my bedroom. You could have walked through the bedroom and stepped through the open window. If he was at that end of the terrace, a good shove might have done it."

"He'd have yelled. You'd have heard him."

"Yes, he would have," Cynthia admitted, studying her friend's face as if she'd never seen it before. "But not if you hit him first with one of my brass bookends. I noticed one had been misplaced on my bedroom shelf and a row of books was falling down. He'd have slumped over the railing and you could have pushed him the rest of the way. The police wouldn't notice one more head wound after that fall. You took the bookend with you or wiped it off with a handkerchief or something and put it back on the wrong shelf. Then you rejoined us as if you'd just come out of the bathroom."

Betty lunged with the cheese knife, but Cynthia had been watching her eyes, as she'd done on stage so many times. She leaped aside. Betty stood between her and the door. The kitchen was out of reach, too. As Betty moved in for another swing with the knife, she ran out onto the terrace. "I'm not Crab, Betty. I don't have my back to you. And I'm not going over this railing!"

Betty smiled and took a step closer. She seemed on familiar ground now, strangely sure of herself. Cynthia stopped moving backward as she felt her hips touch the railing. "Why did you do it, Betty? Did a stupid client mean that much to you?"

Betty took another step forward with a firm grip on the knife. "I *love* him, don't you understand? I'm in this scheme with him now, and nothing's going to stop us. Not Crab, not you."

Cynthia grabbed her wrist as the knife swung again, and they wrestled for it against the terrace railing. She couldn't look down or she knew it would be all over. She tried with every ounce of strength to push Betty back, but the younger woman seemed to have the strength of madness behind her. Cynthia felt herself being bent backward, over the railing. Then there was a terrible noise, and shouting, and Betty was yanked away from her. And someone was pulling her upright, holding her, and she saw that it was Captain Leopold.

Leopold's steak dinner with Captain Roscoe was delayed until much later that night while they explained how they'd been unable to locate Betty Wyle and how the doorman at Cynthia's building had just happened to mention that she was upstairs with Cynthia.

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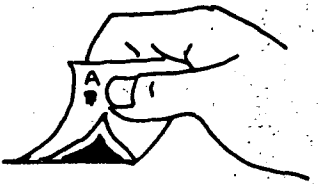
When she didn't answer the house phone, they'd broken in the door rather than wait for the manager to produce a pass key. And Leopold's hunch had been right—Betty Wyle had returned for the notebook where she'd seen Foster's jottings about his meeting with Munday. They had been just in time to prevent another murder.

Whether Gregory Munday knew about the killing seemed doubtful. But it was Betty Wyle's love for him that had driven her to protect him by killing Crab Foster. She knew of the casino money backing Munday, of course, and wanted to protect him from exposure.

"But how did you know it was Betty rather than Cynthia or Ron Sinclair—or someone else?" Roscoe asked him when they finally broke away from headquarters and headed out for dinner.

"Munday's assistant was missing at lunch today, and it occurred to me that the assistant might be a public-relations person. Someone had to set up these luncheons and dinners, after all. Of course, she was missing last night, too, when Foster dined with him. But what really told me it was Betty Wyle was something in their description of what happened after Crab Foster went over the railing. Betty returned to the living room, supposedly directly from the bathroom, and said, 'Where's Crab? The terrace is empty.' But today when I was out there, you were unable to see me in the area by Cynthia's bedroom. You can't see the complete terrace from any one room in the apartment. She said it because she *knew* the terrace was empty, because she'd sneaked through the bedroom window, hit Foster with a bookend, and shoved him over."

They had reached the restaurant and Roscoe held open the door. "You've earned your steak dinner, pal. And Cynthia O'Rourke might want to buy you one, too."



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a *NEW* Jemima Shore story by

**ANTONIA FRASER**

*You have probably seen both on television—Jemima Shore, Investigator, on the PBS* Mystery! *series "Quiet As a Nun," and her glamorous and intelligent creator, Antonia Fraser, biographer of Cromwell and Mary of Scots, among others.*

*Speaking of her amateur sleuth, Antonia Fraser has said that she hopes to explore her investigative possibilities against "a variety of backgrounds other than Catholic convents and the highlands of Scotland." And thus we have Jemima Shore—in her first appearance in EQMM!—sharply observing and thinking through a succession of puzzling and dire incidents at the Holland Pools, where she has escaped for a spot of Keep Fit . . .*

# SWIMMING WILL BE THE DEATH OF YOU

**by ANTONIA FRASER**

"All I say," declared Mrs. Bancroft to Jemima Shore, Investigator, "is that swimming can damage your health. Just like cigarettes. I mean, look at the way you do it, winter and summer. No regard to the seasons. Rain or shine. Hot or cold. Unnatural, I call it."

"It's indoors, Mrs. B.," replied Jemima patiently. "You know, Holland Pools across the road. It's Keep Fit, that's the point. Unwinding after doing the television program. It's far the best quick way of taking exercise. Plenty of people do it all the year round these days."

Jemima sounded patient because she was in fact feeling rather impatient with Mrs. B., her beloved but highly possessive cleaning

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lady. Life working for Megalith Television as an investigative reporter would be quite impossible without Mrs. B., as Jemima was well aware. On the other hand, she was longing to get on with the revised script for her new program on the problems of the working housewife—tentative title: *House Unbound.*

"Plenty of people are not Jemima Shore, Investigator!" exclaimed Mrs. B. indignantly. "Look at that cough you went and got when you were interviewing that poor Asian woman! Everyone was talking about it the next day. Now that was swimming, I bet. No one should swim with a hacking cough."

"Mrs. B.," cried Jemima, putting down the script, "you've just reminded me! I promised Mrs. Robertson I'd meet her at Holland Pools for a spot of Keep Fit!" She jumped up, hoping Mrs. B. would not detect the white lie.

"Jemima Shore," pronounced Mrs. B. darkly as she watched Jemima hastily collect a bright-pink towel and bathing suit and jersey, "swimming will be the death of you."

Not much later, as she changed in one of the narrow cubicles of Holland Pools, Jemima was reminded of Mrs. B.'s dedicated opposition to swimming as a pastime. Someone near her definitely had a hacking cough of the kind that would have appalled the cleaning lady. Jemima could not, however, see who the unfortunate cougher was. It had to be a woman, or rather a female, since a stern notice over the door of this, the right-hand changing room on the way to the pools, commanded: NO BOYS EXCEPT INFANTS. ("Mum, aren't I a boy?" she heard a little boy ask anxiously as he was swept through the swing doors.)

Jemima couldn't catch a glimpse of the cougher because the cubicles were so constructed that the shiny white walls went all the way about the changers' heads, leaving, however, a wide gap at the bottom for the feet. Jemima stooped to pick up her cotton-knit jersey from the floor: to her annoyance it had fallen in a puddle—the cubicles were often very wet by this time of day. It was then that she noticed to her surprise that there were two pairs of feet instead of one to be seen on the floor of the next door cubicle.

How odd, she thought. Then: schoolgirls larking about. A number of neighborhood schools took their pupils to swim at Holland Pools. Jemima was used to the bustle of raucous-voiced swimming teachers, male and female, shouting at recalcitrant figures shivering on the brink. When she arrived in the changing-room, a group of black

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girls had been playing an elaborate game of tag in and out of the cubicles. Jemima judged them to be ten or eleven, and thought how pretty they looked even in the plain school bathing suits, with their slim athletic figures and long legs. Mrs. Ruby, however, the massive figure in jeans and scarlet T-shirt emblazoned HOLLAND POOLS HELPER who was this afternoon in charge of the changing room, took a sterner view.

"No running! No shouting!" Mrs. Ruby called out from time to time in a voice which was itself close to a shout. Mrs. Ruby and Jemima had become good friends. Mrs. Ruby was essentially motherly and in some ways reminded Jemima of Mrs. B. Jemima knew all about Mrs. Ruby's son Michael, who still lived with her despite his marriage, and Mrs. Ruby's unmarried daughter Dilys, who also lived at home. Indeed Jemima knew Dilys personally since Dilys, built on the same cheerful scale as her mother but with a mercifully softer voice, also worked at the pools. The two women, along with others, worked in a rota, which meant that they sometimes oversaw the changing room, sometimes the pools—the latter with the aid of lifeguards. Looking at Mrs. Ruby and Dilys, Jemima could well believe that both were excellent swimmers, competent to save any life in any crisis.

Jemima also knew Mrs. Ruby's unsatisfactory daughter-in-law Lisa—she who refused to provide Mrs. Ruby with grandchildren.

"Though as they're living with me in my nice little house," pointed out Mrs. Ruby, "I could look after the kids. With me a widow, built-in babysitter is what they've got. They'll get the house when I'm gone, of course, but I've a few good years in me yet. The trouble is, Lisa has it too soft. Michael worships her. Gives *her* all his money. No rent for me. Always says he will, then he's short. Dilys and I are quite fed up with her, I can tell you."

Jemima couldn't help noticing how Lisa, the outsider, took all the blame for Michael's financial failure. Yet surely it was as much, if not more, Michael's fault as Lisa's that he paid no rent? As for Lisa, Jemima could hardly blame her if she didn't consider a house shared with a disapproving mother-in-law the ideal nest in which to raise children. The truth was that Mrs. Ruby, and Dilys as well, had never really forgiven Michael, their spoilt darling, for marrying in the first place. Jemima secretly pitied Lisa for being at the mercy of two such formidable women.

"Sometimes I really *hate* her," Mrs. Ruby had once burst out with surprising vehemence for one normally so kind. "When I think how

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happy we all were, me and Dilys and Michael. We just fitted in so snugly together at home. And then *she* came. This morning I could have cheerfully strangled her. Michael had to bring her breakfast in bed—*and* get off to work!"

No, Jemima did not envy the fate of Mrs. Ruby's daughter-in-law. Yet Lisa herself was, to Jemima at least, a rather beguiling creature, even if her interests did not seem to extend much beyond the music she listened to on her Sony Walkman while cultivating a tan in the Sun Lounge next to the big pool. Jemima often saw her there, blonde-streaked hair piled high, leopard-skin bikini or something similarly exotic leaving little of the tan to the imagination. Accompanied by a girl called Gretel, who might have been her sister so far as hair style and bikinis were concerned, Lisa could be seen chatting to, and being chatted up by, various hunks of male beefcake, whose wondrously bronze torsos and perpetual presence at all hours of the day suggested that they were unemployed and making the best of it. Gretel was shyer. Lisa gazed at the young men, but Gretel gazed at Lisa.

"No running!" bellowed Mrs. Ruby. "Can't you kids read the notice?" Looking at the notice herself, Jemima was suddenly aware how many of the notices pinned up around her were warnings. Most of them seemed to begin with the word "beware." For example: BEWARE PICKPOCKETS. BEWARE LEAVING VALUABLES IN YOUR LOCKER. BEWARE TAKING A HOT SHOWER. Now what was wrong with that? Ah—TURN ON COLD TAP FIRST. And these were just in the changing room. On the way to the pools were a series of other notices equally peremptory. NO ENTRY UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES on the door of a staff room. Beside the pool itself, STEEP SLOPE and DEEP WATER were perhaps only mildly menacing. But WARNING TO SWIMMERS and WHAT TO DO IF YOU GET INTO TROUBLE SWIMMING sounded a genuinely threatening note. Most threatening of all—and the largest notice, with red lettering to emphasize it—read: A LOUD SIREN MEANS GET OUT OF THE WATER. THAT MEANS YOU. GET OUT AT ONCE.

Jemima pondered on this as she changed into her suit—silky black, cut away very high at the sides to make her legs look, she hoped, as long as a dancer's. Wryly she wondered whether swimming was really the innocent Keep Fit exercise she had always supposed. How many things could go wrong! Into these thoughts a low voice from the next cubicle cut in so appropriately that for a moment she almost believed she had imagined it.

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"Too dangerous," said the voice, so low that it wasn't much more than a whisper. "Not here. I'd never dare—not here."

"You can," came the answer. "You *can*."

Afterward, Jemima worked it out that the noise of the schoolchildren in and out of the cubicles had masked the sound of her own arrival. In any case, she had chosen a group of cubicles slightly isolated from the main block to get away from the girls' games (and Mrs. Ruby's voice). The heavy steel lockers in which everyone was supposed to store their street clothes while swimming hid these cubicles from the central desk and showers.

Now Jemima remained frozen. Was she to emerge from her cubicle and store her clothes in the locker opposite? (Its number was on the white rubber band around her wrist.) In that case, she wouldn't be able to see the faces of the persons in the next cubicle, unless all parties emerged together, which was unlikely. Curiosity, her besetting sin (or virtue, depending on your point of view) made her hesitate. Who was it who had whispered such a suprising and ominous remark, and to whom?

It was suddenly relatively quiet in the changing room as a whole. The girls had roistered off in the direction of the pool, the noise of their cries and giggles gradually swallowed up in the general pool noises. Even Mrs. Ruby was silent. While Jemima hesitated, she heard the sound of the adjacent door opening, and before she had time to gather her own bundle of clothes, there was the soft patter of feet. No locker doors slammed. Whoever her mysterious neighbors were, they weren't using lockers 200 to 250. Other than the fact that their feet verified them as female, Jemima knew nothing else about them. Especially she didn't know what it was that was so dangerous to accomplish.

She decided to put the incident out of her mind. After all, swimming wasn't only about keeping physically fit, it was also about mental peace and relaxation. Doing her laps in a graceful, not too energetic crawl up and down the pool, Jemima concentrated on relaxing—even if that was a slight contradiction in terms. At the shallow end, the schoolgirls were continuing their larks. Occasionally one of the bigger ones swam up to the deep end and performed a perfect swallow dive. Another class of children, boys as well as girls, were learning lifesaving. Every now and then a pair wearing, rather incongruously, cotton pajamas or flowered dresses would jump into the water with a great splash and one would rescue the other.

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The adult swimmers were much less in evidence. Many of them wore goggles against the chlorine, which made it impossible to be certain about their sex once they were in the water. Jemima herself hated chlorine, but she hated bathing caps and goggles more. She generally pinned her golden-red hair up and washed it out under the shower later. It was when one swimmer suddenly said "Hello, Jemima" that she wished the flamboyant color of her hair was not quite so recognizable. Then, to her surprise, Jemima found herself alongside Lisa Ruby, swimming a fast but jerky breaststroke in the opposite direction. What was more, Gretel was there too, swimming gamely alongside like a sister ship.

Lisa made a grimace. "I don't know about you, Jemima," she panted, "but I don't think this is any fun. Keep Fit! Keep Cold, more likely. Still"—she indicated Mrs. Ruby, whose scarlet T-shirt was visible at the edge of the pool—"*Mum* said I had to do it. Said I couldn't just lie about in the Sun Lounge. I must swim today. What business is it of hers? Oh, well, anything for peace." Lisa was puffing quite heavily. Gretel swam more easily—but then, she wasn't trying to talk at the same time.

Jemima crawled on, while Lisa, accompanied by the faithful Gretel, continued to chug forward to where the children were learning lifesaving. Jemima decided to put the encounter with Lisa out of her mind as well. Keep Fit, relax, relax. She did a couple of lengths without noticing anything very much except the ripple of the light azure water ahead as her arm cleaved through it.

It was because her head was more than half buried in the water that at first she didn't appreciate the sound of the siren for what it was. Then suddenly the ugly blaring message reached her. Feeling guilty because she must have swum on when a swimmer was somewhere in trouble, Jemima speeded up her pace and raced to the steps at the shallow end. Clambering out, she grabbed her pink towel with its JS logo and draped herself hastily in it.

She found herself amid a crowd of dripping children being assembled into some kind of order by the teacher. The pool was now all but empty as the last adult swimmers removed themselves. But the boys and girls in the lifesaving class were all still up at the deep end, many of them dripping wet in their baggy cotton clothes. It was somewhere at that end that the commotion or whatever it was had evidently taken place.

The siren, mercifully, stopped at last. Then in the new silence

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could be heard the sound of a woman's voice screaming over and over again: "She tried to kill me—she did, she tried to kill me!" After a while, the voice itself was interrupted by a horrendous fit of coughing and spluttering.

Jemima could now see quite clearly the figure of Lisa Ruby, recognizable more by her leopard-skin bikini than by her streaky blonde top-knot, since her hair was now streaming down her back in a bedraggled mass. A man, presumably a lifeguard, wearing a HOLLAND POOLS T-shirt and black trunks, put a red towel around her and started to lead her away. Gretel, already draped in a red towel, trailed after her.

In spite of Lisa's hysterical words, Jemima felt relief that the siren meant nothing worse than some kind of minor incident in the pool, from which Lisa had clearly emerged with nothing worse than a ruined hair style. It was time to go and change. In spite of Mrs. B.'s gloomy prediction, swimming had not been the death of her (or anyone else, fortunately) but it might be the making of a very nasty cold if she hung about much longer in a wet costume.

It was only now, as she turned toward the changing room, that the continued presence of a knot of people, including some of the children, at the head of the pool struck her as unnatural and disquieting. Then the children moved away and Jemima saw with a sick feeling that there was someone lying flat and unmoving on the side of the pool with a person kneeling over it, kneading it, pumping it, rhythmically hitting it. The person trying to resuscitate the other was wearing a red T-shirt—Dilys Ruby. The inanimate object was also wearing a red shirt. With mounting horror, Jemima realized it was Mrs. Ruby herself.

Some time later, when Mrs. Ruby's sodden and lifeless body had been taken away in an ambulance accompanied by her distraught daughter, it was still rather difficult to make out exactly what had happened. A series of accidents or unfortunate coincidences was the general shocked verdict on Mrs. Ruby's death—although there would, of course, be a full inquiry into the exact circumstances which had led up to it.

It all began when Lisa Ruby got into difficulties—on that everyone was agreed. Had Lisa's difficulties been brought on, as Gretel suggested, by two children from the lifesaving class jumping in far too close to her? Or had Lisa herself accidentally swum too close to the class area, as the teacher indignantly countered? At all events, Lisa

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became, as she put it, "absolutely swamped—my mouth filled with water, I was drowning!"

"So what was a poor swimmer like her doing in the deep end in the first place?" demanded the teacher angrily. To which Lisa, weeping and coughing at the same time, responded: "*She* made me! It was all her idea, Mum's idea!"

At this point, the presence of the children splashing about and practicing lifesaving proved to be the most unfortunate coincidence. Normally, the lifeguards would have been alert to any splashing and Lisa would have been rapidly rescued and towed to the side. As it was, her struggles passed unnoticed for a few critical moments.

It was Mrs. Ruby, who had just taken leave of Dilys on her way to the staff room for a cup of tea, who saw what was going on and jumped in. Even then all might have been well, since Mrs. Ruby was a proficient swimmer and lifesaver. But somehow the splashing children, the choking Lisa, Gretel ineffectively trying to save her friend although a very poor swimmer herself, and Mrs. Ruby all became fatally entangled. Those children who ambitiously sought to carry out their newfound skill of rescue only added to the confusion.

Then it was, according to Lisa, that Mrs. Ruby turned from would-be savior into would-be slayer. Only the lethal struggle had somehow gone wrong, and by the time the lifeguard reached them, with the siren urgently sounding, it was Lisa who was able to be rescued and Mrs. Ruby who was not.

Jemima gazed in pity at Lisa's pathetic tear-blotched face, her damp blonde hair screwed back again into a tight little knot. She thought of the terrifying, destructive power of family hatreds and how Mrs. Ruby's jealousy and resentment of her daughter-in-law must have suddenly crystalized into an overwhelming impulse to remove her forever from her life—and Michael's life, and Mrs. Ruby's house.

"I could cheerfully have strangled her," Mrs. Ruby had said to Jemima. Unbidden, those other sinister words overheard by Jemima in the cubicle floated to her mind: "Too dangerous. Not here." And then: "You can. You *can*." If one voice was Mrs. Ruby, warm and motherly Mrs. Ruby, then the other must by implication have been her daughter Dilys.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a fresh bout of coughing from Lisa. Gretel, sitting beside her (both girls still wrapped in the red Holland Pools towels), put her arm around her friend's shoulders in

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comfort. Jemima looked down. The girls were too shocked even to put on shoes, let alone to dress. At which point Jemima found her thoughts being diverted in a strange new direction by the affectionate nagging voice of Mrs. B.: "No one should swim with a hacking cough." And the memory of a white-tiled floor.

I'm going to follow it through, Jemima promised herself: there's something wrong here. Why did Mrs. Ruby choose today to make Lisa go for a swim? Especially when Lisa's ill-health, cossetted by Michael, was already causing her annoyance? Jemima studied the tile floor again. Swimming in that state *could* be the death of you—but it wasn't the death of Lisa, was it? It was the death of Mrs. Ruby.

Again she thought of the cubicle conspiracy. "Not here. Too dangerous." And the other voice urging her on—"You can. *You can.*" She thought of the terrible power of an apparently weak swimmer calling for help—choosing her exact *moment* when Mrs. Ruby was passing close on the brink and her exact *place* in the midst of the confusion of the lifesaving class. A weak swimmer with a heavy cough which gave plausibility to her dramatic gulping.

"Swimming will be the death of you." Looking down at the floor, Jemima knew that she was looking at the two pairs of feet which had inhabited the next cubicle. It was Lisa and Gretel who had made sure that Lisa's swimming would be the death of Mrs. Ruby.

"The house," said Jemima slowly. "You couldn't wait, could you? The house and Michael. She grumbled about you, but you hated her. And so you trapped her between you. And you drowned her."

"That's not true! It's not true!" Lisa shrieked, and she started to cry again. Fatally, she added before Gretel could stop her: "You can't prove it, you can't prove anything!"

"Maybe not at the moment, here in the changing room," said Jemima grimly, "but once we've all got our clothes on, I'm going to have a very good try."

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a *NEW* short story by

**ROBERT TWOHY**

*Lincoln had dreamed of his funeral just before he was offed—the Flea had told them that in class last year, everybody listening for once. What did Lincoln's dream mean? That he feared death, that was all? Or had he got a glimpse of death rushing at him from the future?*

*Just as William Bankier is unfailing on the subject of music (see page 140), Robert Twohy on the subject of teenagers is uncanny and true . . .*

# GIRL IN A DUMPSTER

***by ROBERT TWOHY***

It began with a shot of Mr. Fleeman, Amer. Hist., perched on his desk, pale chinless face with weird thick glasses on top of a hairy spider's body. Why a spider? He was Fleeman the Flea. But maybe the dream didn't know how to do a flea so had made him a spider with six wavery legs. She'd accept that.

She knew that it was a dream she was partly in but not completely. He swayed on the desk and said whisperily, "Tell us about the Scene, Miss Remington." The weird glasses glared her way.

"I'm not Miss Remington. She dropped out last term."

"Tell us about the Scene."

"The Scene." She stood up. "I'm learning about it but I'm not on it yet. Lucy Remington is on it. Vee Winters is, too. Vee has a low IQ but Lucy's is high. She was taking college credits and her father said he'd send her anywhere she wanted, Miami or Wellsby or anywhere. That's a rich school in New York her mother went to. But she dropped out to go on the Scene. So that's where she is now, living in her old Dodge van." She sat down.

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The Flea said, "Who are you?"

"Linda Nobody."

"Do I know you?"

"No. I took history from you last term."

"What did you get?"

"C." Which was the best grade as it brought down no hassles.

"Do you know what a B means?" The Flea was gone and it was her father in his chair in the den, frowning at Linda's report card. She had her hair in barrettes, wore a neat little blouse and skirt, and short neat socks. Her mother was there, moving around like it was better to be moving if the father started spitting words like darts, though he seemed to not know she was there. . . This was a memory of one day when she was ten.

"B," said the father, "denotes capacity for an A—which you failed to achieve."

Dancing in on that memory came Lucy Remington, age seventeen, small, perky, short black hair, crooked grin, bright green eyes. Waltzing around, she chirped the alphabet song, "A B C D E F G," shooting grins at Linda, who was back to her real age, fifteen and a half.

Linda smiled back, flustered but happy that Lucy, a star at school and sure to become one on the Scene, had come to see her.

"Should you be here?" the mother asked quaverily.

"I brought these—I don't need them." Lucy pulled from her worn red jacket a string of A's, silver and glimmery, which she stretched both arms to spread in front of her as her father stared bewitched.

Murmuring "Beautiful, beautiful," he lunged from his chair, reaching. "See what you tossed away," he spat at Linda, who was ten again. "You could have worn them like a cloak of glory." But Lucy let go and the A's split from each other and swooped and airdanced separately, evading his clutches as Lucy laughed, not meanly but because it was funny the way they flitted shimmerily and kind of wiggled their hips as he tried to nab them. They knew they were being cute and funny.

"Not so." The Flea was back on the desk and kind of prowling around. "Grades are serious whether you like it or not."

Linda stood up. She was fifteen and a half. "The Scene is where young people go to learn about life and who they are. There's music and love and truth."

The Flea weaved around. "A child's garden of fantasy."

Linda sat down as Lucy came and stood near the desk, gazing at

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him with bright clear eyes. He licked his lips and his face jerked variously with tics. "I'm getting my MA at UC and will go on to a PhD. My BA is from Chico State, which I frankly acknowledge. I'm a student of life and reality."

Lucy said, "The Scene is a mix of things. It's like Linda says and it's other things, too. A lot of it's theater—lots of games are played."

"People get killed." Linda's father, back in his chair, had the evening *Courier*. "Here's one got it. Teenage girl, it says, found in a dumpster at a gas station. Three .22 shells in her—chest, belly, and left shoulder. Bled to death." He gave a burst of laughter. "A dumpster!" He beamed at his ten-year-old daughter. "Is that what you want?"

"Do you, Linda?" asked the mother, hands moving around unintendedly. "I want you to be happy."

"Like you?" asked Lucy.

The mother said anxiously, "I have a worthwhile life."

"In what way?"

The mother shook her head, moved her hands, and took small steps leading her nowhere.

"Do you want Linda to grow up like you?"

The mother couldn't answer or wouldn't. The father said, "Here's another—dog dug up a young girl over on the coast—she'd been hacked and savaged." He smiled toward Linda.

Linda turned from him to Lucy and was her real age again. It was just the two of them, the mother and the father were gone. Linda said, "What games?"

"Lots of them. Lots of players. You hear someone's a really heavy dude, better not mess with him—so you play a game on him to find out if maybe *he's* playing a game. Sometimes everyone is playing a game but a different one is going on underneath." She rubbed her small firm chin and frowned. "It can be scary sometimes—a game can be right on the edge."

"Of what?"

"You don't know. That's when it's most exciting." She grinned her crooked grin. "You don't know if it's really danger or just a game."

"Did you know the girl in the dumpster?"

Lucy gazed off. "Sometimes various games come together and kind of fuse and become a game nobody knows is being played—and nobody's in charge, the game takes charge. And it says, 'To keep playing, there has to be a sacrifice pawn!'—and that's the only move on the board."

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Linda watched herself in the dream, walking around, hands moving. Lucy said softly, "The Scene might not be for you."

Linda stopped, looked at her. "I want to be like you—not a star, because I'm not, but—like you, going off on your own, learning who you are, taking care of yourself. When you need money, you get a waitress job I've heard, not having to go Vee's way because you're bright and quick and perky and she's big and slow. I don't want to be like the mother, not daring to cope or even knowing how."

The Flea was back on the desk. A big girl stood by it, in scroungy clothes and with a wide babyface under a tangle of dark hair. Innocent dark eyes had a gleam that mocked innocence. "My name is Vee Winters." Her tone was clear and sweet.

The Flea whispered, "What does Vee stand for?"

"Dope and sex." Linda heard a low roll of laughter behind and around her in which was her own high giggle. Vee didn't smile but gazed chastely back at the Flea.

He wasn't on the desk but was moving about on the long legs as Vee sat in a witness box, big and soft but with poise, feet tucked neatly under her, plump littlegirl hands at rest on the wide thighs of stained jeans. "You're Victoria Winters, who dropped out eight months ago with poor grades and went to live with a degenerate cemetery worker in Colma, then left him to move in with three addicts in Belmont. They gave you a corner for sleeping and food and dope if you would work for them as a highway prostitute. You did, working the El Camino, men stopping for you and taking you up in the hills."

"Sometimes to a motel, if they had money and wanted I should clean up first."

"You met a man called Peter the Pirate, operator of an auto junkyard, also reputed to be a hit man. Someone burned in a dope deal and wanting revenge hires Peter, two hundred or more, who attends to the person and puts the body in a dumpster or buries it on the coast, as the case may be."

Linda's father whispered, "You better listen to this." He was beside her, she was ten years old. He licked his lips and flicked glances at Vee Winters with her babyface under the untidy pile of dark hair and her big soft body.

The mother was walking around. She murmured to no one, "I was never a highway prostitute."

Lucy's voice said, "All you ever were was a child with dreams.

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When they stopped, you stopped being anything. You never learned what you might have inside."

The mother said uncertainly, "Blood?"

"Maybe. But who ever learned?"

The mother, gazing at Lucy, got a look in her wide eyes that was strangely sad and tender. She started to put out her hands like she would like to hold her, then brought her hands back and shook her head, sighing. "Nothing I want to express ever turns out to mean anything." Lucy looked at her, surprised, as she walked away. Linda was surprised, too, then remembered once when she was very small, and was scared or bewildered by something, and her mother looked at her like that, and reached for her, and the father spat out something, and the mother pulled back her hands and walked away, and the father took charge of whatever situation it was. Since that time when the mother had held her it hadn't meant anything, nor had the mother.

The Flea said to Vee, "Peter became your lover. You went to live with him. *Is* he a hit man?"

Linda leaned forward, eager to hear. The father was gone, she was fifteen and a half again.

In real life she had heard of Peter the Pirate, as people in the doper crowd at school told each other stories of the Scene, what they had picked up from various grapevines. Linda wasn't in the crowd but on the fringe of it. Peter was a star, she had heard. He wore a thick black beard and a gold chip in his left ear, filthy black denims, and $300 black boots. He drove an awful old LTD painted dead-black like a pirate ship and walked with a limp so you thought of a pegleg pirate. He always had money and good dope and didn't work much at his junkyard, where he chopped up and rearranged hot cars that thieves brought him. He was thirty. He laughed and winked a lot. He shot liquid coke. He was a hit man, or a gameplayer who liked to scare young dopers new on the Scene—only playing that he was such a bad dude.

Vee was gone. The Flea was perched on the desk, weaving on his legs. Lucy said, "We like to think he is."

The Flea turned his weird glint to her—she was by the desk, her bright steady eyes on him. His face got tics and he whispered, "It rates near the top in the State University system."

"What does?" It was Linda's own voice asking.

"Humboldt State." He asked Lucy, "*Who* likes to think he is?"

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"All of us on the Scene. It makes us more real if *he's* real, not just a player."

"You shine in his light."

"Yes. It's scary and exciting, life at the edge, if he's really a hit man. We want him to be—all the time knowing it's probably a game we're all playing."

Peter was the most famous and fearsome of the stars on the Scene that Linda and her doper friends had heard of. She guessed that he came poking into many of their dreams, as right now he came poking into hers—first small and far away, just a dot whirling in big loops, coming closer and showing as a head with black hair flying, a face, no body, then getting bigger, not looping now but rushing straight at her, leathery skin, black beard, thick hair, gold chip left ear—stopping abruptly, looming, left eye squeezed in a wink and teeth shining in the black beard as the right eye leered . . .

She heard a weak scream and it was her, and the dream was over.

She lay shivering a while. Then she sighed, hitched up so her shoulders were up on the headboard, got a Salem from the pack on the table, and in moonlight smoked and wondered about the dream.

Her father said that dreams were fears and inadequacies rearing out of your subconscious. He said he hadn't dreamed since he'd earned his MS.

He had minded B's on Linda's card, but when in eighth grade she started getting C's he decided she wasn't brilliant after all but had taken after the mother, and stopped minding.

Eighth grade was when she had got on dope. She supposed that her grades going down connected with that fact—which was good as C's and an occasional D caused no hassle after he stopped minding what she got.

So she stopped being frightened by B's and school became fun for the first time with friends she had never made when she was working so hard for A's. For a C all you had to do was make class, which if you cut too many times you got a D, which didn't matter any more than a C did.

She supposed her father knew she doped but preferred not to, as long as it wasn't pushed in his face. The mother may have known, but didn't do or say anything, of course. So through the eighth, ninth, and now into the tenth grade, Linda went on doping, gradually finding out about the Scene and wondering excitedly and sometimes in terror how she'd fit in when the time came to make her move.

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She sat smoking the Salem. She never kept dope in the house. She would go find somebody of the crowd, or several, or the whole crowd, Carol and Squirt, Helen and Don and Freak, others—find them in their hangouts around Lindenvale, the pizza joint, the burger place, the video room at the bowling lanes. They might go off in somebody's car, or to someone's house where the parents weren't home or wouldn't complain because they'd rather not make a nishew. Or they might walk in the park. Wherever, as they toked they'd exchange the latest about Lucy and Vee, and Peter the Pirate and others they'd heard of on the Scene, who though they'd never seen them in person had become realer for them than the parents and teachers they saw daily, who weren't real at all.

Nearly all the things that had come rearing up in Linda's dream were from those exchanges, people telling what they had heard on a grapevine, or a few times because someone had happened to run into Lucy or Vee who had told of their latest adventures, which were re-told to the crowd. Linda had not run into Lucy or Vee since they had split Lindenvale. The Scene was centered in Redwood City, twenty miles down the Peninsula, and Linda never had reason to go there. Lucy never showed in Lindenvale because she knew her parents were looking for her. Vee showed a few times because nobody was looking for her—her aunt not giving a damn—but Linda hadn't seen her.

She sat half raised, knees up, smoking and wondering. What does a dream mean? Could it amount to more than her father said, more than just an illustrated package of your fears and failures?

Lincoln had dreamed of his funeral just before he was offed—the Flea had told them that in class last year, everybody listening for once. What did Lincoln's dream mean? That he feared death, that was all? Or had he got a glimpse of death rushing at him from the future?

She hadn't seen anyone dead in her dream. But two deaths had been mentioned—a body found in a dumpster and another on the coast.

In the past three months, two girls' bodies had been found. Linda had read the stories in the *Courier*, not in the same edition but several weeks apart. And one body had been dug up on the coast by a dog, like in the dream—but the other hadn't been found in a dumpster, but in the trunk of an abandoned car in a supermarket lot in San Carlos.

The doper crowd had jabbered about both cases, wondering if the

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girls had been from the Scene, if they were revenge killings, if Peter the Pirate was involved—but there had been no jabber about any body found in a dumpster with three .22 shotgun shells in it, and no story in the *Courier*. So no such murder had happened.

Linda got a feeling like ice-cubes in her chest that made her gasp. Jamming out the Salem in the ashtray, she hugged and rubbed the iciness, and after a while it melted down and went away. Sighing, she pushed down from the headboard, turned on her side, tucked herself into a ball under the covers, and felt small and afraid.

She wasn't quick and superbright like Lucy, or dumb and slow but with street smarts like Vee. She couldn't play games or know who was playing and who wasn't, or when the game was on the edge, or taking charge. If the dream meant that a young girl was going to be found in a dumpster, she didn't want it to be her.

She said low but out loud, "I'd rather grow up like my mother than not grow up at all. I don't want to know Peter, grinning and winking. I'm going to stop dreaming about the Scene. Maybe I'll get another dream or maybe I won't, but dreams of me and the Scene are over. Period, and that's it." She was mostly her mother's daughter but she had some of her father, too.

She drifted into sleep and dreamed no more that night.

Two girls lay in the park with a pizza. They were Carol and Helen. After the last greasy wedge slid down, they smoked.

Carol said, "There's little Miss Wimp." Linda was walking on the path where other students were walking through from school, which had just let out. This day, Carol and Helen had declared a day off.

Carol called, "Hey, Linda!" and waved the hand with the toke. Helen waved, too. They had big phony smiles. Linda gave back a small phony smile and a wave and kept walking.

They looked after her. Carol said, "She's a nothing."

"She always was."

"I dunno why we let her hang around so long." Helen didn't either.

They looked away and forgot about her.

A lanky girl came hustling across the grass making crowing sounds. Her eyes were bright and her big mouth gaped in a grin featuring horseteeth. She flopped down by the girls, sucking in air after her run. She was Freak.

She got breath and was offered a hit. She waved it off, eager to spill her big news. "You'll never guess who I was with this morning!" She gave them no time to. "Peter the Pirate!"

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The girls' four eyes stretched wide. "You were with him?" "You *saw* him?"

Freak rocked on her folded storklegs, grinning flatly. "Saw him and had lunch with him."

Carol gave a scream and Helen bounced around on the grass. Freak basked. She let them chirp frantic questions, then held up a hand.

"Shut up and I'll tell you."

They shut up. She told how she had spent the night in Redwood City at her married sister's, who late that morning had driven her back to El Camino.

"Get to Peter!"

"I am. I saw Vee—you can't miss that big rear end. There it was at the window of this burger dump—"

"Katie's?" The grapevines had it that Katie's was a place where real heavy dudes hung out.

"No, not Katie's—Jack's, I think, or Shultz's, or something."

"Okay, you saw Vee. Then what?"

"I told my sister to let me out, I'd take the bus from there. She wanted to take me to the depot but—"

Helen, tiny and intense, shrieked, "The hell with your lousy sister! Get to the story!"

Freak sulked a few seconds, but being as eager to tell as they were to hear, she got on with it.

She had departed her sister and gone up to Vee, who looked great. "You know, she has kind of a glow when she's really cleaned up and feeling good—she has great skin, which is what gives her that little girl look." Vee had glowed at Freak and said she was getting a couple of burgers for herself and a friend, would Freak like to join them? Her treat. She bought burgers and Pepsis and fries, and they carried them in two sacks to a big, ugly black LTD in the lot.

"Peter's car!"

"Sure. I knew that, of course, when I saw it. He was lying in the back seat and Vee said who I was and he straightened up and said Hi. Vee got in front and I got in the other side front and he was in back and the three of us ate and talked."

"What was he like?"

"Did he say anything crazy?"

"Did you see a gun or anything?"

"Were you scared?"

"What'd he say?"

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Freak held up a hand and they calmed down. She said he wore a buck-knife in a sheath. No gun—or if he had one she didn't see it. "I wasn't scared. He smiled and talked low and has dark sexy eyes and terrific white teeth in that black beard. He had—"

"A gold chip in his left earlobe?"

"Yeah. And ragged old black denims and really classy boots. He asked about school—how I was doing and so forth. I said what crap it was and he kind of frowned and said I shouldn't be too fast to split, take my time, get a little older. He said some people come on the Scene too young and think they're smarter than anybody—and ripoff games can be a big mistake. That's what he said."

The girls chewed on that. Carol said slowly, "He was telling you something, huh?"

Helen said, "Like, when we get on the Scene, we should watch ourselves? That we'll have a lot to learn?"

Freak nodded. "That's what I got. He was talking kind of slow and quiet, looking off with a sleepy look. Vee was looking at him real bright-eyed. She asked him something real low. I couldn't hear. And he gave her a real slow nod, and a wink."

"Which eye?"

"Left."

"Do it."

Freak gave an approximation, near or far, of Peter's famous wink. Each of the girls practiced, Freak instructing. "No, harder. Skin your lip back more. That's it, yeah, kind of like that. Watch me—like this." Finally they got it as good as they were going to, or wearied of it.

Carol asked, "Then what?"

"Then what what?"

"What'd he say to Vee when he winked?"

"Oh. He said, 'Good long way.' "

"What did that mean?"

"Well—he looked at me kind of sudden, like he'd been daydreaming, and said, 'On the Scene, some people who really set out to can go a good long way.' And he gave a little popping sound that was a laugh, and Vee smiled and I did, too, 'cause it was funny, that popping sound. Then Vee dumped our garbage and he said they'd drive me, so she came back and we drove to the depot." Freak wished she had a flashier windup but that was it.

Carol, after starting another smoke around, asked, "Did they say anything about Lucy?"

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"Yeah. I asked and Vee said she hadn't seen her a while but had heard she was thinking of splitting to Oregon with a guy she'd met from there and guessed maybe she had."

Helen sighed. "She goes where she wants when she wants. She's got all the guts she'll ever need."

Carol nodded. "She's special."

They all agreed that Lucy couldn't miss being a big star on the Scene, in Oregon or wherever she decided to go.

Since the dream Linda had got on better with her father. He was still a pain, but she guessed everyone is if all you focus on are their bad points. She looked for his good points and found some—not many, but some.

Her mother was timid and unsure, but so was she. She hoped she'd get less so as she got older and would work on it. She knew she'd never be a star, but she would hang in and graduate and go to San Mateo College and maybe there get an idea of what work she could do that she might enjoy doing. Maybe she could work up computer skills and get a good job in a TV studio. That might be a dream worth holding.

She saw Peter in a dream. He came whirling at her and loomed, grinning and winking, but she wasn't scared. She said, "You can't touch me. I'm not on the Scene and won't be." A second time she saw him, dim and blurry, and he broke up and disappeared before even getting close. That was the last time.

At school she cut connections with Carol, Freak, Helen, and the others, and wasn't missed.

She heard from somewhere that Lucy had taken off for Oregon with a guy. She was glad. She wasn't so sure now that the dream had been a view of the future, but it could be—and if someday she read about a girl in a dumpster, she wanted it not to be Lucy. She had always liked her.

When she saw Fleeman the Flea, she smiled, and he would duck his chinless face and simper and walk by fast, probably wondering if she was getting a crush on him—a thought that made her giggle.

So her life went on, toward wherever it would go.

Some miles outside the town of Riverport, 100 miles or so inland from the Bay Area, the body of a young woman was found in a dumpster on the lot of a long-defunct gas station at a crossroads. It had lain there six weeks or more, the Medical Examiner estimated.

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It wore jeans, a sweater, and an old red jacket. A .22 shotgun shell was in the stomach, another in the chest, a third in the left shoulder.

In the right hand, clutched tight, was a scrap of black denim, which Sheriff's Department detectives thought might develop into a clue if they could get a line on the murdered girl. They put it in a plastic envelope, labeled it, and put it in a drawer.

They never got a line on her, though. She found her way to wherever in that county they dispose of bodies they can't put a name on. Maybe the scrap of denim is still in the drawer.

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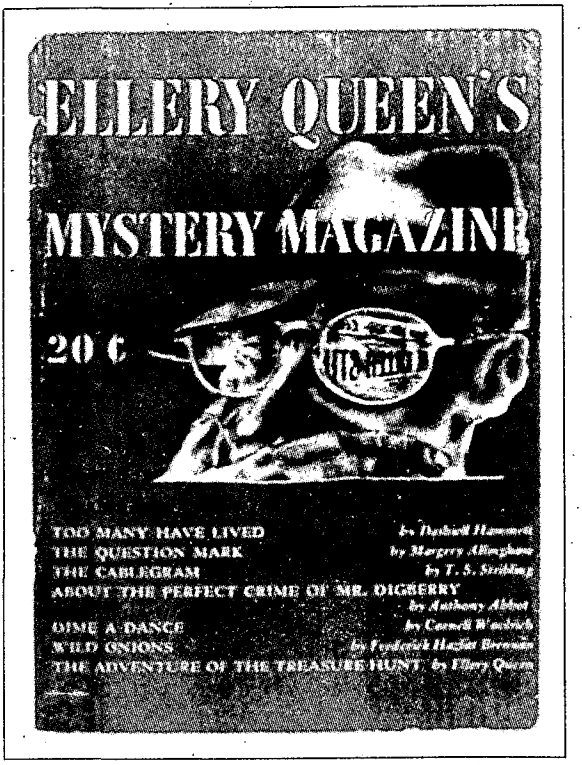


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*A bruising story in three parts, spanning the thirty-two years between the Great Depression and early summer, 1965. A story about heritage, farm life, and time . . .*

# A WILL OF HER OWN

**by DON GILBERT**

October 1933—the Great Depression.

Bertha Dohr lifted her meat cleaver from its chopping block in the pantry and moved across the farm kitchen. It was two o'clock of a perfect Indian-summer day in Wisconsin and she planned on fried chicken for the evening meal.

In a way it was to be a special meal, although no one but she knew that as yet. After supper she intended paying their young hired man, Chris Mehls, his wages and sending him kindly but firmly on his way back to Chicago. He had no relation there that she knew of, but it was where he said he had come from so he would likely go back there. He would have enough for train fare or he could catch a freight and save his money. The heavy farm work of summer and fall was done and they no longer needed him. Besides, President Roosevelt had a new program called the Civilian Conservation Corps for indigent young men such as Chris. But paramount to these facts, Bertha was beginning to feel very uneasy where Chris was concerned.

She clearly remembered when he had come to them last spring: a rainy and chill March night. Then he had been a forlorn and bedraggled youth with few pretensions of manhood left to him. That had changed as his young body filled out with wholesome food and physical labor. Now there was a dawning look in his dark eyes that Bertha didn't like—he was becoming too much his own man to suit her.

Anton, her husband, had answered the knock at their back door that evening seven months ago. She and their daughter Laury sat by the wood heater in an inner room, wondering who on earth could be out on such a night. They could hear Anton's deep voice, as always

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a trifle uncertain, and the other voice, young and edged with desperation. "I got off a freight train from Chicago. All the way, I been looking for work, but I can't find none anywhere! I was headed for Minneapolis, but some guys said farm folks are friendlier than town folks, so I just decided to get off when the train slowed down, down the road. I thought you might let me sleep in your barn, help with some chores."

"I don't know," Anton said nervously. "I'll ask my wife."

Bertha had left her rocker and gone to the kitchen.

"What's going on here?" she had asked.

"He wants to sleep in our barn, wife."

"And set it on fire with his cigarettes?"

The young man had a canvas-covered bundle under his arm. His clothes clung damply to his body, his jacket too lightweight for a Wisconsin March. He looked underfed to Bertha, but his frame was strongly made. His dark eyes questioned hers, half pleading, half demanding. "My name is Chris Mehls," he said, "and I don't smoke. I can't afford to. You folks on farms don't know what it's like in the city. There's no work. You sleep under bridges or in abandoned tenements without heat—you eat rich men's garbage and stand in line for Salvation Army handouts."

"Och," Bertha cried, "you don't have all the troubles in the world! You just have more filth in the cities. In the country, banks fail. The few pennies you save line a rich man's pocket. But you *can* live if you are willing to work. Most people in the cities forget what it is to work like a farmer. Up at four in the morning, never in bed before eleven at night. Well, let him sleep in the barn, Anton. He is young and full of woe and I would not turn a dog out on a night like this."

"Maybe we should give him some bread?" Anton suggested.

Bertha could hear Laury breathing behind her. The girl was always getting upset about something. Twenty years old but, like her father, easily swayed. Bertha doubted if she would ever really grow up and have a will of her own.

"Mama, could I make him a sandwich?"

"Why not?" Bertha said sardonically. "And a glass of milk. Dry off by the fire, young fellow. I don't want to find you dead in my hayloft tomorrow morning."

Already the tireless gears in her mind were meshing. Now that Anton was getting rheumatic, they needed a part-time hired man, but hard times and a small farm wouldn't allow them such a luxury. However, a needy man who would work for his board and sleep in

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the barn—if he was any good and not shiftless— A dollar now and then if he didn't use it for tobacco, and some old clothes of Anton's that he had become too heavy for—

Well, it had all worked out pretty well for all concerned. But now Bertha sensed it had to end. She gave Chris credit: he was not afraid of work. Sometimes he was awkward at strange tasks, but he was willing to learn, and obedient even while his dark eyes challenged her. *I am eating your food and sleeping in your barn because I have to. But I do not belong to you and I never will.*

Yes, there was something about Chris that warned her. With Anton he was free and easy—with her, he was guarded, as if he knew she was measuring him for some purpose. She caught him secretly watching Laury, his dark eyes and aquiline face hungry and aglow. She was stunned, then angry, and finally, because she was at heart an honest woman, self-blaming. She should have guessed what might happen when two young people such as Laury and Chris were thrown together day after day in the natural life of a farm, especially when there was little contact with others but themselves.

Laury had never made friends easily, even in school, and now that those days were past she was more than ever by herself. She was a slender, silver-blonde girl, not especially pretty, with pale-blue eyes that forever asked for understanding and gentleness. And Chris was far away from his kind, in unfamiliar surroundings. It was only natural that they were drawn to each other. Bertha could see her daughter was more than a little attracted and disturbed by the youth. Perhaps a little frightened but not as frightened as she should be. Near Chris, her breath was uneven and delicate color flowed and ebbed in her pale face.

When Bertha first noted these signs, she wondered if it might not work out well. She had always felt cheated that her only child was a girl. A girl was not as useful on a farm as a boy, although Laury had always done her share of the work once she was old enough. At least in this adopted land a girl was not expected to bring a dowry to her husband. But the young men of the neighborhood didn't flock about Laury. She had never really had a beau. And now here was Chris!

Yet, in only a short time, Bertha realized he would not do! He would never marry Laury and stay on the farm, caring for her aging parents. His will would become stronger and more assertive with each year. If he truly loved Laury, he would take her away, back

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to his world, and that would never do. No, he must go, and the sooner the better. It was as simple as that to Bertha. What her husband and daughter felt was of little consequence because both would follow her edict. So tonight she would give Chris his small wages and he could catch a freight or take the 10:20 passenger back to Chicago. She would point out to him that one of President Roosevelt's CC Camps was the place for him to go with winter coming on.

Swinging the cleaver, Bertha left the house and moved purposefully toward the chicken run, followed by a retinue of cats. Abstractedly, she noticed that Laury's favorite, Big Tom, was not with the other half dozen. That was not to be wondered at because he was seldom away from Laury's side and Laury would be down in the apple orchard gathering windfalls for the pies Bertha had told her to bake.

At the chicken run, Bertha set her cleaver on the block and went into the enclosure to select a rooster for the evening meal. The fowls were so used to her that they flocked about her feet, expecting to be fed. She made her choice and went back out to the chopping block with it chuckering under her arm.

There wasn't even a disillusioned squawk at the descent of the blade and Bertha pressed the spasmodically jerking bird to the grass until all movement ceased and it was thoroughly bled. Not until then did she become aware of the otherwise absolute quiet of the afternoon. The farmyard was suddenly too hot, too still—the blue Indian-summer haze on the hills premonitious and suffocating. The only life in the world seemed to center at her feet, where the cats pestered each other over the severed chicken head.

Beyond the barn, far down the now barren oat field, Bertha could see Anton working on the pasture fence. Chris would be there, too, but she couldn't see him, likely hidden where a line of trees marked a swale. She looked back past her own farmhouse, smothered in old trees, down a field of shocked corn to where neighbor Olson's farm buildings were hidden in a dip of the land. Now totally possessed by an old wives' feeling of impending trouble and still clutching the cleaver in her hand, she moved through the narrow service gate to the barnyard and across the enclosure to the barn itself. A cat came bounding through the half open feed-room door and she recognized it as Big Tom. His eyes were two coals of fire glowing in the midnight of his face. He hissed angrily as he passed her. Strange cat—temperamental as a lord. The feed-room windowpanes glittered in the slanting sunlight. (Bertha insisted that all outbuilding windows

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be kept as shining as those in the house.) Quick as an animal despite her size, Bertha moved to the window and looked inside.

What she saw completely paralyzed her for a moment. Chris was not with Anton. Laury was not in the orchard gathering apples for pies. They were lying on a bed of feed-sacks locked in each other's straining arms.

Rage following her initial stunned disbelief like a jolting electrical shock, Bertha kicked the feed-room door wide open.

"Debaucher! Whore!" she shrieked and, swinging the cleaver hard above her head, she brought it down on Chris's skull.

August 1945—Hiroshima.

Laury picked up her berrying pail from the deal table in the pantry. There was also a pint of fresh buttermilk her mother had set out for her to take to Mr. Olson. Jake Olson was cutting their oats that day. Since Anton's death, the Olsons were doing all the field work on the Dohr farm. Bertha and Laury still did the farm chores, caring for the eight cows, the small flock of chickens, the garden, and the orchard, while the Olsons sharecropped the land. It had proven to be a satisfactory arrangement for all concerned. The Olsons had always been their nearest neighbors and closest friends—almost their only friends.

Laury moved down through the garden and between the double row of trees that formed the orchard. Since her father's death, it had grown rank with grass each summer. Bertha would allow no one to scythe it, although it would have been impossible for anyone to guess the secret that lay beneath the matted sod.

Anton had loved his orchard. Four of the trees were bearing fruit when Bertha and he had bought the farm—the rest he had set out through the years, pruning and spraying with care: two rows of trees really set too close together since age had turned the four oldest into giants. A miracle of perfumed blossoms in the spring and excellent fruit in the fall. Town folk had bought Anton's apples and the cider he pressed from the windfalls and they still bought apples from Bertha, although she allowed no one in the orchard. The cider press had long since fallen apart.

Laury paused where the four oldest trees made an airy room with their heavy trunks and interlacing branches. Despite the strong summer sun beyond a net of leaves, she shivered as if a sudden cold wind had touched her. She often felt that way in the orchard. Not a strong emotion, because the years had dulled her first terrible

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revulsion. The sensitive, dreamy girl she had been was now a mature woman filled with an almost stoic acceptance. But she believed something really had died in her heart that lovely Indian-summer day twelve years ago. It seemed as if she truly lacked any volition of her own, waiting for her mother's determined hand to guide her on her way.

Laury stumbled on an object hidden in the grass. Righting herself, she saw it was a stone she had painted white and placed as a marker on the grave of one of her beloved cats. There were sixteen such stones, with Big Tom's in the middle. An orchard cemetery—but with one grave unmarked.

Musing, Laury wished they could have buried her father here. But the law would not allow that. A stranger could be buried here in secret, but the man who loved this place could not. His death and burial could not be concealed—his church demanded consecrated ground.

Down by the fence line where the blackberries grew, Laury saw Jake Olson on the far side of the oat field, his horses and binder moving in a thin haze of dusty heat. He had already made several rounds on the perimeter and when he came even with her she called, "Jake! Oh, Jake—wait up!"

She slipped between the taut strands of wire fencing, pulling her skirts clear of the barbs—she could never bring herself to wear jeans as many farm women were beginning to do—and hurried across the fresh stubble. Jake pulled his horses to a halt to wait for her. He was a big, gentle, tobacco-chewing Swede Laury trusted implicitly.

"Mama sent some buttermilk for you—it's just out of the churn," she told him as he wiped his sweaty face with a red bandana.

"Your mama is one of a kind. Don't know of another woman left around here who churns her own butter. Sure glad she still does." Jake spat out his cud and emptied the pint jar in two drafts, wiping his moustache with a free hand.

"Did you have your radio on this morning, Laury?"

"No, our radio don't work very good. It's an old one papa had. Besides, mama says listening to the radio is a waste of time."

"Could be, could be," Jake said. "Your mama's got her own idees. But I like to listen to the news. So then you ain't heard what happened in the war yesterday. It was an awful thing, but it'll likely end the war and save a lot of our boys."

"What was it?" Laury asked, not too interested. To her the war was so remote it might have been on another planet. Of course, there

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was always war talk after church but she and her mother seldom lingered, coming straight home from the service.

*Gossip*, Bertha said. *Seems all most people think of is gossip.*

"They used that new atom bomb we've been hearing so much about," Jake said. "We dropped it on a city in Japan—Hiroshima was the name. Killed thousands of people and pulverized the city. To hear them tell, it ought to end the war. It's an awful thing to think on and to do, but it was them or us. War is sure hell no matter which side you're on."

Laury drew back, shaken. She didn't want to think of anything so horrible. She grasped at the known tide of everyday life. "I got to pick some blackberries for mama this morning, but after dinner I'll come and help young Jake shock oats."

"No call for that, Laury. That gaffer can get this field shocked easy in half a day. He's a whiz."

"I know," Laury said, "but I want to help." She was filled with a fine trembling. "The field looks so pretty and patterned when the shocks are all set up."

Turning abruptly, she fled back to the blackberry patch. She tried to shut everything but the present from her mind. Still, Jake's words kept ringing in her ears:

*Hiroshima was the name. Killed thousands of people and pulverized the city . . . War is sure hell no matter which side you're on.*

Her fingers trembled so she could hardly pick the ripe fruit from the brambly vines. She finally filled her pail and moved back up through the orchard. Under the gnarled limbs of the four oldest trees, her legs gave out and she slumped to the ground.

Leaning back against rough tree bark, she closed her eyes. She could hear the horrendous explosion, the screaming of a mutilated multitude. She saw the scorched and shredded bodies and the old buildings dissolving into rubbly dust. She moaned, tears runneling down her cheeks. For the first time since she had realized her father and mother had buried Chris's body in the orchard, she felt deep and wrenching emotion. Suddenly, with a clarity that did not include self-pity, she saw the rest of her life laid out bleakly before her. There was only being alone with death at the end of it.

Had Chris really loved her? He said so and she had believed him because she loved him so much. Yes, he'd loved her! —Really? Perhaps papa was the only one who truly loved her. Mama never did. She would have preferred a son. But when mama died, there would be no one left for her.

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Chris. Only a few weeks of secret happiness to last a lifetime. A little time of utter joy in giving all she had to give. Then years of being shut in a shell of silence, trying not to remember, forbidden to remember. But she would never forget!

The cats purred as they rubbed against her. Absently, she stroked them. At least they needed her. And now she could feel again, painful as that was. She wiped her eyes on the hem of her skirt, wondering why some distant disaster, unrelated to her life, could have awakened her to such strong emotion again.

June 1965—the Tornado.

For a time after her mother died, Laury felt completely lost. She had loved her father, but she had been dominated by her mother. Without Bertha she scarcely knew which way to turn. There had been that lovely summer in the Great Depression that had ended in secret tragedy. It seemed to Laury she had scarcely had a thought or secret desire of her own since then. There had been only that time, at the end of the Second World War when the atomic bomb was used on Japan, that she had come wrenchingly alive. That, too, had faded and now she was suddenly and completely alone—like a maple seed twirling in the wind.

She was left with the routine set by her mother for over fifty years: up early in the morning for chores, eating a frugal breakfast, caring for the cats, the chickens, the cows, the garden, the orchard. Neighbors tried to be kind to her, but she wasn't used to such attention and reacted coldly so she was gradually left alone. Except for young Jake Olson and his wife. They still sharecropped her land.

Town people smiled when her name was mentioned. *Always was an odd person. Smart in school. Her mother never let her have a beau. There was a young man from Chicago worked for her folks one summer during the Great Depression. He went away when Roosevelt opened the CC Camps and was never heard from again. Nice young fellow but likely too strong-willed for Bertha—or too smart to get involved.*

By the end of the first year after her mother's death, Laury was beginning to lose her aimless feeling. She found she liked being alone with her animals. She had long since lost her fragile silvery blondness. Her long hair was now a yellowish grey, worn in a knob at the back of her head. Her once clear blue eyes had faded to a pale grey and her skin was weathered and fine-wrinkled as crumpled vellum.

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Laury raised a big garden and sold vegetables. She sold berries and fruit from the orchard. She kept five cows and sold the milk to a local processing plant. With young Jake Olson cropping her land (he now had a tractor and modern machinery), it all worked out well. Slowly, with no interference, Laury became a quiet, self-reliant woman.

Going to the barn with the sun just coming up, coloring the eastern sky a disturbing crimson, Laury had a quiet feeling of worth and possession. A half dozen cats followed her, tails erect, anticipating a pan of warm milk. Laury paused to sniff the air. It was too still and hot and the east was too crimson. Her father had always been a gentle weather forecaster, her mother scoffing at his powers of divination, but Laury had believed in his forecasting and felt that she was now nearly on a par with him.

Now she was keenly aware of the morning. It had been a sultry night and the red-tinged brass bowl of the sky made her uneasy. The sun seemed to come up with a lunge, stealing color from the sky.

There was no breeze and the air clotted in her lungs. Chickens huddled in one corner of their run, uninterested in the scattered grain, and the cattle were contrary to human wishes.

That was the way the day went and by late afternoon thunder was a constant faroff rumble. Laury milked early, but the cows were so skittery they didn't give their milk down easily. By the time chores were done, Laury was as nervous as the animals. Hesitantly, she turned them into their night pasture. Outside the barn they were at least free.

From the southwest to the zenith, the sky was a dirty, roiling blackness, intensifying the clear blue of the east. There was a constantly shifting movement in the clouds, an embodiment of the thunder that seemed to come from all directions.

Laury called her cats and ran for the house, half flinging herself down the cellar stairs. At the base of the steps, a narrow stone passageway led to the one-room cellar and here she stopped. There was an abrupt, breathless stillness outside, followed by a rushing roar.

The little house shook as Laury crouched against the dirt floor of the alleyway. There was a rending and shrieking outside and in a moment the pound of torrential rain drowned all else.

Laury had no idea how long she crouched there, shaking and half unconscious. But finally the uproar outside lessened and the quiet

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was a startling vacuum. Her cats were all close about her, rubbing and purring as if to tell her the danger was past, and gradually she straightened up and climbed back up the outside stairs. She moved out into the yard and looked back.

The house, the trees about it, and the outbuildings seemed scarcely touched. There was only the strong sweet smell of shredded leaves and pounded grass on the evening air. Far to the southwest, the sky was a fresh-washed deep azure with a luminous moon floating above a black line of hills.

Laury turned toward the orchard and gasped. Beyond the garden, the apple trees were an uprooted, twisted mass. Like a sleep-walker, she moved down into the wreckage. The younger trees had snapped off like matchsticks and the four old ones had been literally wrenched from the earth. Their tenacious roots had pulled up the sod and soil to a depth of three feet or more.

Laury moved forward and peered into the shallow excavation, her heart pounding wildly.

She saw below her the broken skeleton of a human form. The rain had washed away all covering and now the scattered bones gleamed creamy white in the nacreous moonlight.

She had always known Chris was buried here, and at first she had avoided the place until new grass made a fresh carpet above him. Then what had happened did not seem so awful. She had never really blamed her mother for what had happened, or her father for helping cover the crime. There had been four people involved and four people to blame. Gradually she had found comfort in visiting the place.

Now she whispered, "Chris— Chris—" and slipped down into the shallow pit where the skeleton lay.

Later, when lights cut the night in her driveway, she went out to where young Jake Olson and his wife were getting out of their car.

Yes, she was all right. No, the twister hadn't harmed her house or the outbuildings. The cattle were still safe in the night pasture and the chickens hadn't blown away. Only the orchard was gone, but, please, she begged Jake, others likely were much worse off. If his own property was safe, he should go see about them.

Then she was alone. By the pale glimmer of the moon and the fresh-washed stars, she got the wheelbarrow from the woodshed. On the back porch she unloaded the accumulated junk from the old sea chest her father had brought from Denmark and put the chest in the barrow.

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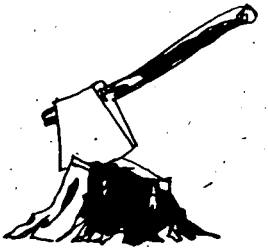
She wheeled the barrow to Chris's grave in the orchard. There was nothing left of the blanket her mother had wrapped Chris in after burning his clothes in the heating stove. Doggedly, Laury wrapped his bones in a clean sheet and packed them in the sea chest.

She knew exactly what she would do with them. She would keep the padlocked chest in her bedroom until winter came, then she would burn them in the heating stove. The ashes she would put in a small wooden box she would wrap and tie in a fine length of pale-blue silk she had. And when she died, she would leave strict orders that the box was to be buried with her in her coffin. No one would ever know what the box contained, but Chris and she would be together forever. The wishes of the dead must be obeyed. Even the wishes of a crazy old woman.



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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY NEWSLETTER

# CRIME BEAT

**by R. E. PORTER**

*PWA AWARDS:* The annual Shamus Awards of the Private Eye Writers of America were presented recently as part of the program at Bouchercon XV in Chicago. Winner of the Shamus for the best private-eye novel of 1983 was *True Detective* by Max Allan Collins (St. Martin's Press). The award for best paperback novel went to *Dead in Center Field* by Paul Engleman (Ballantine), and for best short story to *Cat's Paw* by Bill Pronzini, published in a limited edition by Waves Press. The Life Achievement Award went to William Campbell Gault. Our congratulations to them all.

*NO MYSTERY:* Having successfully enlarged the operations of The Mysterious Press, Otto Penzler has launched a new publishing imprint, Penzler Books, devoted to non-mystery novels and collections by well known mystery writers. The first title, Donald E. Westlake's comic novel *A Likely Story,* has just appeared and it'll be followed this spring by Patricia Highsmith's *People Who Knock on the Door* and the first book publication of Rex Stout's 1914 magazine fantasy *Under the Andes.*

*CRIME CLASSICS:* After several years of publishing single additions to its Library of Crime Classics, International Polygonics has added eight new paperback titles to the series, including novels by Christianna Brand, John Dickson Carr, Margaret Millar, and William F. Nolan, and an original short-story collection, *Die Laughing and Other Murderous Shtick* by S. S. Rafferty, containing Chick Kelly stories from *EQMM* and *AHMM.*

The Rafferty title is also available in hardcover.

*LIMITED EDITIONS:* Among the more interesting limited editions are *Homicide Sanitarium* by Fredric Brown, seven stories and novelets from the pulps, introduced and signed by Bill Pronzini ($30.00 from Dennis McMillan Publications, 328 Madison Street, San Antonio, TX 78204), and a miniature book of the first Sherlock Holmes short story, Conan Doyle's *A Scandal in Bohemia,* measuring just 2¼ by 2¾" ($30.00 from the Press of



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Arden Park, 861 Los Molinos Way, Sacramento, CA 95825).

*SINISTER SUNDAYS:* Bogie's Restaurant, 249 West 26th St., New York City, is well into its fourth season of "Sinister Sundays," with old radio shows, mystery films, and—usually on the last Sunday of the month—a talk and autographing by a mystery writer. Among those tentatively scheduled are Carolyn Wheat (1/27), Richard Hoyt (2/24), Mary Higgins Clark (3/31), Loren D. Estleman (5/19), and Franklin Bandy (6/30).

*SUSPENSE FILMS:* Elmira College, Elmira, New York, is again offering a course in the suspense film, conducted by Professor Amnon Kabatchnik. Each of the 13 sessions, beginning in January, will deal with a sub-genre of the suspense film, screening and analyzing films like *The Cat and the Canary, M, The Hound of the Baskervilles, The Maltese Falcon, And Then There Were None,* and *Rififi.*

*CHANDLER CHAPBOOK:* Brownstone Books (1711 Clifty Drive, Madison, IN 47250) has just published the first volume in its Brownstone Chapbook Series, *Hardboiled Burlesque: Raymond Chandler's Comic Style* by Keith Newlin. The 50-page booklet, priced at $4.95, is an in-depth study of the subject with liberal quotes from Chandler's writing.

*TORONTO BOOKSHOP:* Visitors to Toronto should be sure to stop at Crimehouse, 175 East Queen Street, a fine new shop with a large stock of U.S., Canadian, and British hardcovers, paperbacks, Sherlockiana, and first editions.

*COMING ATTRACTIONS:* Due in January from Putnam is a new medical thriller from Robin Cook, *Mindbend,* while Arbor House will offer *Glitz,* a novel of Atlantic City by Elmore Leonard.

Among the February highlights are a new spy novel by William F. Buckley, Jr., *See You Later, Alligator* (Doubleday), the second in a series of original anthologies, *Ellery Queen's Prime Crimes 2,* edited by Eleanor Sullivan and Karen A. Prince (Dial), and a paperback reprint of one of MWA's best annual anthologies, Anthony Boucher's *Four and Twenty Bloodhounds* from 1950 (Carroll & Graf).

Now that the new spy magazine *Espionage* has been successfully launched as a bimonthly, look for the *New Black Mask Quarterly,* to be distributed as a trade paperback this spring by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. The magazine of new and old hardboiled fiction is edited by Matthew J. Bruccoli & Richard Layman.

Coming from Scribners this spring is *Big Fish,* the latest novel by Edgar-winner Thomas Perry.

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"Q"



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# BLOODY VISIONS

**by CHRIS STEINBRUNNER**

The pendulum in television programming is swinging back again to the mystery. The years of situation comedies have given way once more—happily enough—to solid drama series on every channel, and some that are indeed very welcome.

The best proof of the renewed strengths of mystery television is the return of the truly traditional whodunit. *Scene of the Crime,* on NBC, is a pure-form mystery puzzle in the guise of murder game. Suspects are introduced and interrogated before the viewer—Orson Welles makes a commanding figure as the host—and the crime is reenacted. Then a group of celebrity guests attempt to tackle the solution, a device which harks back to the "armchair detective" personalities who were asked to solve the Ellery Queen radio mysteries just before the climax. Richard Levinson and William Link, the Edgar-winning writer-producers who brought the Jim Hutton *Ellery Queen* series to television, are consultants, so the whodunit dramas have been deft and fair. Alas, the puzzles comprise only the first half of *Scene of the Crime,* with a more conventional suspense dramatization without celebrity guessers at the finish rounding out the hour. This makes the project a lot less bold, but it is still—according to NBC—"the first interactive mystery show on television."

There's happy viewing for mystery addicts, as well, on PBS stations, which have welcomed back Horace Rumpole (Leo McKern at his irascible best) after more than a year's absence. The doughty barrister has been forced into retirement in Miami—an unlikely paradise for him—but lizarding on a beach chair is hardly his strong tea. Soon enough he has boarded a clandestine night flight to London and made a triumphant return to the Old Bailey, scattering ashes and poetry and tackling murder. PBS is presenting six Rumpole dramas in all, and all of them are absorbing, quite unusual cases, with the old legal fighter in finest fettle.

There is other mystery fare on PBS as well. Agatha Christie's husband-and-wife sleuthing team, Tommy and Tuppence Beresford, have five romps on American television in the *Partners in Crime* series, lushly produced in period by London Weekend TV. You will recall that the Beresfords are worth far more than tuppence, being a 1920s aristocratic couple who for a lark have bought a decaying detective agency in order to chase boredom by solving really bizarre cases. The stories are light and witty, though hard-core viewers must be warned they rarely involve murder.

Murder of the body-in-the-library variety is promised in the ten-part Miss Marple series PBS



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has also acquired, for the four Christie novels being serialized are *The Body in the Library, A Murder Is Announced, The Moving Finger,* and *A Pocketful of Rye.* British character actress Joan Hickson plays Marple, and Christie's grandson recently told EQMN that he is pleased with the interpretation. PBS has also added to its lineup thirteen close adaptations of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories, with Jeremy Brett as Holmes. (Those who remember the 1964 screen version of *My Fair Lady* will recall Brett as the dashing young suitor who sings "On the Street Where You Live" to Audrey Hepburn.) Public Television has never looked better.

The more routine cases of cops-and-robbers drama can be watched on network and cable TV in abundance. HBO has produced a fine adaptation of Joseph Wambaugh's best-selling novel, *The Glitter Dome,* casting James Garner and John Lithgow as two police partners sludging through the gritty realities of Los Angeles crime (although the movie was largely shot in Canada). Margot Kidder and Colleen Dewhurst are two suspects in an unsavory Hollywood murder. The best of the new police shows on network television appears to be NBC's high-voltage *Miami Vice,* which has vigor and street realism and two interestingly shaded detectives as unstoppable heroes. The Miami setting is diverse as well.

But widow Jessica Fletcher steals the mystery television season for my book. Actually, it's *her* book, a whodunit she's penned which becomes a runaway bestseller and sweeps her into social circles where murder happens and cries for solving. Angela Lansbury is utterly captivating and energetic and right as the slightly Marpled heroine of *Murder, She Wrote* (CBS), finding nephews everywhere and bodies in and out of libraries, a beguiling crime spree of the old but good school. No surprise, as consultants for this series as well are Levinson and Link. Interestingly, just as in their premiere *Ellery Queen* episode, here in Angela's maiden outing they have the detective spend the entire case proving who *didn't* commit the murder, until the final moments when the suspects have been whittled down to the one guilty party. However you cut it, though, *Murder, She Wrote* is the best entree in a full buffet of great mystery consumption this season on the television screen.

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# THE JURY BOX

**by ALLEN J. HUBIN**

Every state in the union has been used as a primary setting for mystery novels. New York (over 3300 novels identified) and California (over 2000) far lead the list, followed by Massachusetts (over 400), Florida (over 360), Illinois (over 350), and Connecticut (over 270). States like Arkansas, Idaho, North Dakota, Delaware, and South Dakota (fewer than ten each) bring up the rear.

Let's start with New York. I missed Frank Orenstein's first novel (*Murder on Madison Avenue,* 1983) but his second, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Shroud* (St. Martin's, $13.95), pays surgically witty attention to the advertising game and leaves the literary ground awelter in well turned phrases. Ev Franklin, research V.P. at the Finch, Rowan & Hyde Agency, returns here to attend the matter of a terminal which assassinated an agency computer jock—the case of a terminal terminal, one might say. Franklin's boss asks him to investigate, the police invite him not to, and his native cowardice sides with the cops. But he asks a few ill-advised questions, the bodies pile up, and he and his become prime targets. On the evidence of *Shroud,* both Franklin novels should be well worth tracking down.

Nebraska is another little-used mystery setting, and perhaps the city of Omaha has never been featured before William J. Reynolds' *The Nebraska Quotient* (St. Martin's, $13.95). Here a chap named Nebraska labors in two fairly barren vineyards. He's a writer, selling short material while composing a detective fiction masterpiece in the vein of Hammett, and doing some private eying until literary fame arrives. What arrives first is the dying body of his bent ex-partner, bearing nude photos of a U.S. senator's daughter. The cops invite him out, as is their wont (see above), but in hallowed private-shamus tradition he pokes about, endangering his skin and uncovering the spoor of gangsters, the odor of blackmail, and additional corpses. A pleasant debut.

My home state of Minnesota is also an uncommon setting. Michael T. Hinkemeyer, a native of the state, set an excellent 1977 novel, *The Fields of Eden,* in rural Minnesota and presented the fascinating Sheriff Emil Whippletree with a nasty murder to solve. Whippletree, now retired and arthritic, returns in *A Time To Reap* (St. Martin's, $12.95). He's asked by his overwhelmed successor to help solve a particularly gruesome double murder—a fine way to spend a frigid Minnesota Christmastime. This entangles Emil once again with organized religion and its clerics—here Roman Catholic—and allows evil to threaten even his own home. Hinkemeyer well understands his milieu and portrays



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it with clarity, humor, and empathy.

R. D. Rosen, a Boston TV writer/producer, offers his first novel, *Strike Three You're Dead* (Walker, $12.95). It's one of the best sports mysteries I've read and a book that the MWA Edgar committee should have its eye on. Rhode Island, a further infrequent mystery setting, is where the latest American League expansion team is playing its first season, in the city of Providence. The Jewels are mostly a collection of castoffs, over-the-hill and never-getting-to-the-hill. They've also got Harvey Blissberg, a .300 hitter Boston forgot to protect in the draft. In addition, apparently, they have a killer, because someone disposes of Harvey's roommate, a relief pitcher, in notably grisly fashion. The cops go nowhere on the case, and Harvey feels this debt to his dead friend of sorts, so he keeps nosing about and ignoring death threats as his team heads for the bottom of the standings. Who would kill an indifferently successful relief pitcher on a last-place team, and why?

Texas, with something over 90 novels, is a bit underutilized as a setting relative to its size. But one, David L. Lindsay's 1983 debut, *A Cold Mind,* was magnificent, and he brings back his beset and driven Houston policeman, Stuart Haydon, in *Heat from Another Sun* (Harper & Row, $14.95), which is very nearly as good. Lindsay here opens a door into the hell of human bestiality and depravity, and while the experience may not be enjoyable it certainly is impressive. The murder of a videotape editor at an ad agency would not seem momentous, but that may depend on what he was editing in the late hours and for whom. The trail leads to one of the city's industrial leaders, the reclusive Joseph Roeg, and to a climax of devastating intensity and revelation.

Another door is opened by "Joe Gash" (Bill Granger) in *Priestly Murders* (Holt Rinehart & Winston, $11.95), and though the terrain is different the description of what passes for justice in Chicago is also a small and memorable glimpse of hell.

A Catholic priest, substituting at a disintegrating slum church, is shot to death. Witnesses describe the killer as a policeman, and the Church applies pressure to get the case solved. It would be handy to pin the crime on a patrolman pulled in for rape, no matter that he's not a murderer. But a few cops would prefer to corral the real killer and are willing to go against an archbishop, the city political machine, and a jackass in priestly garb to get it done.

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## DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

*A distinctly different "first story"—Number 620—by Susan Alcott, whose fascinating background includes a good deal of nonfiction writing. When she submitted "The Metamorphosis of Nathaniel Kronstadt" to EQMM, she was employed as Public Relations Administrator and Feature Writer/Editor for Kenny Rogers Productions. She has been a reader/synopsis writer for Screen Gems TV and studied screenwriting with Sheridan Gibney, Writers Guild of America West, The Actors Studio Playwrights Unit, Gardner McKay, and Arthur Alsberg—all in Los Angeles, where "Nathaniel Kronstadt" has its "how to succeed in business" setting and takes its "sweet smell of success" feel . . .*

# THE METAMORPHOSIS OF NATHANIEL KRONSTADT

**by SUSAN ALCOTT**

Nathaniel Kronstadt had just come off a one-month, seven-day-a-week bummer. His thirty-year-old skin was stretched taut across his prominent cheekbones. Brittle. Drawn to the breaking point, like the skin of an unoiled drumhead. His endurance had given out two weeks and approximately three thousand miles earlier. Name it, Kronstadt had seen it—twice. He was a Chauffeur for Hire.

His normally perfect leonine amber hair clung to his skull like carrion worms. No one had to ask the man to know that he was bone-tired.

He double-checked the rearview mirror. Seeing it all clear, he whipped a perfect U into the Celeb Limo lot. While easing the Silver Stretch into its allotted space, Nathaniel spotted two other Celeb drivers limping their filthy limos onto the lot. He checked his 14-K

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Seiko Quartz. It flashed 8:00 A.M., exactly. The end of the line for the three men.

The drivers extended polite nods while going through the ritual of clearing their personal gear from their respective drivers' compartments.

The thought of abandoning Celeb-10 grated deeply inside Nathaniel. He took care of her as if she were his, payment book and all. Although exhausted, he couldn't resist giving her divider window a final shot of Windex and a loving swipe with an ever-ready tissue. Then, giving her one final appraisal, he dumped his chauffeur's gear into his own baby-blue VW. Ice bucket, plastic champagne glasses, various neatly packaged goodies and sundries. Everything for his clients' comfort—everything within reason. If clients were into heavy stuff, Kronstadt figured they could furnish their own mirrors, razors, and needles. He drove a clean stretch. Whatever they chose to do behind the divider window was their business. As long as their cash was good, their checks didn't bounce, and they didn't throw up on his lambswool carpets, it was their business.

Nathaniel jingled the heavy pack of keys against his right palm and achingly dragged his narrow body up the stairwell leading to the Celeb office.

He dropped himself into one of the grimy plastic chairs that lined the wall directly across from the dispatcher's cluttered desk. "When is this place going to spring for some decent chairs?" he asked Celeb's owner and morning dispatcher, Harry Goldfind.

Without looking up from his bank of phones, Harry shifted behind the laminated walnut desk. He finished dispatching four pickups to four drivers in the field, while keeping two clients happily waiting between hold buttons. Harry was a master of the trade. He believed in "the long dollar."

"What's the matter, Nate? Plastic pre-fabs too tacky for your elegant tushy?"

Nathaniel simply watched, a big bush cat surveying his quarry. He loved the game Harry played with him. He always allowed long silences between the boss and himself. He knew it unnerved the old man. Like the great cats, Nathaniel Kronstadt rested until it was time to spring.

"The new Fleetwoods are on the showroom floor, Nate. You wanna go see?" Harry finally squeaked his chair in the direction of his number-one driver.

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Nathaniel closed his eyes and sighed. "Colors?"

"Yeah, colors. Golds. Burnished greens. Earth colors, just like you suggested." Harry panted. Sweat sprang from his creased brow. He flicked it off with a fat forefinger. "Pinstripes, too. What do you say, Nate?"

Nathaniel's face registered nothing. Harry was the only person allowed to call him Nate. To everyone else, it was Nathaniel.

"Soon."

Their game was interrupted by the phone. Harry took the rush order with charm and diplomacy. He was the best. He quickly dispatched the order to a free man in the field.

"Smitty, get ready to copy. I don't care if you made your last drop. This is important. Pick up Mr. Fazi Talla at LAX in an hour, on British." He rolled his eyes. "*I* don't know what he looks like! What does a sheik look like? Hold up a damn sign! Come on, Smitty, show some class. The bell captain at the Beverly Wood asked for you. You got a week's possibility. They want transport to the Springs."

Harry clicked off the mike and shook his head in exasperation. "Rookies. They drive you nuts."

Nathaniel made a mental note of the sheik's name. A small uncertainty jabbed at him. Why was Smitty requested? Why not him? He smiled at Harry.

"How soon, Nate?" Harry pressed. He'd always relied on Nathaniel's taste in Fleetwoods.

"As soon as I steam the world off my bones and get ten hours' sleep."

"You know, your insane schedule is gonna land you in a sick bed." Harry frowned, disappointed by the turndown.

"You worry about it here, I'll worry about it out there. I know my limits."

Harry curled his lip. "You'd better. You're the only man I have who insists on working through off-time. It's gonna kill you. Too much greed, Nate."

Nathaniel stretched his spine. "Yeah? It depends on what side of the wheel you're looking from, Harry. Everything is relative."

He stood and stared down through the streaked window. Celeb-10 waited below. An aching came over him and lodged in his chest. He always felt an overwhelming sense of loss when he had to abandon her to another driver. She was his baby. He cringed at the idea of someone else exerting power over her pure, silver body. She carried him past all boundaries of time. Behind her wheel, Nathaniel

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knew he would never die. He had worked it out numerically. Celeb-10 translated into one. As long as he was within her confines, he would live forever.

It had begun eons ago. A spark ignited and a soul came into being. Translucent, silica crystals that had once been stone shone beneath Nathaniel Kronstadt's narrow body. He gave himself up as a sacrifice to blazoned yellow skies. Balancing atop a sacrificial altar of an ancient Aztec pyramid, pure, untouched, clean for all time, driving energy reigned silently within him. It had been written into his code long before he had come into being. Reality would be Nathaniel Kronstadt's enemy. He listened to the methodical rhythm of his own heartbeat. White silence enveloped him. He waited patiently for release. The rising odor of musk piqued his nostrils.

He had parked his blue VW near the entrance to the Beverly Wood Hotel. He snapped the aluminum tanner shut. The heat had activated his after-shave cologne. Musk, mixed with his tired body toxins, overwhelmed his frail, exhausted frame. It overpowered him. He glanced at the cabs lined along the curb, then checked the magnetic deli sign he had clicked to the outside door of the VW. It was still in place. *Dan's Deli. 24 Hour Deliveries.* He smiled. None of the cabbies would wedge him out. They would assume he was there to make a delivery. He checked his rearview to see if the tanner had put some color back into his taut-boned face. It had.

Allowing for traffic and waiting for luggage at LAX, the number in the sheik's entourage and the tie-ups on the 405, Nathaniel figured that Smitty should be pulling into the drive within the next few minutes. Nathaniel was precise to a fault. His timing was near perfection.

As he brushed his hair with his genuine boar-bristle from Fred Segal's, he caught sight of Celeb-2 pulling into the curving drive. He flipped his brush into his Gucci travel case, pulled the deli sign inside the VW, and watched.

Sheik Fazi Talla, flanked by four sphinxlike men of various shapes and ages, paraded before Nathaniel's rearview and disappeared into the gaping mouth of the coral albatross. Nathaniel strained to pick up a thread of their conversation—to no avail. Their fading cacophony was foreign, ancient. Sounds dead to his ears.

He watched as Smitty and two bellmen trudged behind, groaning against the endless weight of designer luggage, like desert beasts

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of burden. This was one of the many embarrassments Nathaniel despised about his trade. He longed for elegance.

Without warning, a blood-red fingernail jabbed at the crease in his jacket. Carla tapped icily at his shoulder.

"Hi, sweetie. What brings you to my favorite watering hole, as if I didn't know?" She laughed huskily.

He hated Carla's laugh. It cut through him like a harrowing wind. He gave her a disapproving look and prepared himself for the hustle.

"Honey, you can't hide that little calculator in your head. It shows in your eyes. Sweet little Nathaniel, always casing a potential mark."

Nathaniel stared straight ahead without looking at her. She glared at him and flipped her streaked mane of hair. "My afternoon sugar should be pulling up any second."

He hated her. But between them it was strictly business. Carla hadn't stiffed him—yet. An arranged love match was always good for a quick $60.00.

Sugar drove up right on cue. Nathaniel recognized the plates on the 450-SL. It was a rental. Sugar was a real sport.

"Don't forget what I said, Nathaniel honey. I caught you eyeing the posh parade your rookie hauled in."

Nathaniel cringed. "I'll check it out, Carla," he snapped.

She smiled. "Just leave word with the barkeep at C&C's and there'll be a little something extra in your Christmas stocking." She blew him a kiss and shimmied her expensively wrapped body into the waiting 450-SL.

Smitty registered surprise when he saw Nathaniel lounging against his limo. The young driver loosened his tie and removed his rumpled jacket. Nathaniel appraised his attire. Simple man, he thought to himself.

"Hey, Nathaniel. You're the talk of the grapevine. The guys are laying bets you won't be able to keep up the pace."

"I gotta keep my baby in diamonds," Nathaniel quipped.

Smitty grinned. "What woman would put up with your crazy hours?"

"I have bigger plans. No station wagon full of bawling kids for me."

He'd hit Smitty's wing. He gave him time to ponder his trapped existence.

Smitty pulled at his tie and dropped his eyes. The smile left his voice. "Yeah. It's hard going home after seeing this day after day."

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"How'd you like to cut in on some extra tips?"

Smitty's eyes widened. "How?"

"Would the sheik like to fall in love?"

Smitty was slow in picking up the gist. A three-month rookie.

Nathaniel grew impatient. He handed Smitty a slip of paper. "Here's my number. If your man wants to fall in love, give me a call. There's a machine on it. If he does, there'll be a little something extra for your kid's Christmas stocking."

He didn't wait for Smitty's answer. He had planted the seed. It would just be a matter of time before Smitty called.

Nathaniel drove east on Sunset. He wished his VW had cruise-control like Celeb-10, then he could program his homing device, lean back, and let himself be carried . . .

He ached for the Silver Stretch. Inside her, he was safe from pain, safe from rejection, safe from the world. He trusted her completely. He knew her every sound. He knew what Celeb-10 needed before any of the dials registered their lack on her sleek ebony dash. She kept him safe from the unconscious terror that grabbed his throat while he slept. As long as he was protected in her silver womb, he knew he wouldn't die.

A traffic tie-up snapped him back to the reality of the Strip. After a weary ten minutes of it, he made the left turn into the parking area beneath the Serené View Apartments. While Nathaniel parked, he spotted the new tenant getting into her lime-green Impala. Her permed hair overwhelmed her small tanned features. Nathaniel eyed her with curiosity. His normally precise manner gave way to the most erotic of fantasies. He nodded politely as she slid into the driver's seat. She felt his penetrating stare burn into her left temple. She returned a neighborly nod before driving the Impala out onto the street.

An aspiring starlet, he thought to himself. He hadn't missed the beat-up suede portfolio she had tossed onto the back seat. He couldn't understand why the young woman didn't take the time, money, and effort to invest in an expensive portfolio. After all, it carried her dreams. He thought how she looked like perfection driving off—and brushed the thought away. Her portfolio gave her away. He always looked for flaws. It gave him the excuse to avoid intimacy at all costs.

Aside from Celeb-10, Nathaniel Kronstadt's universe consisted of a 19-inch Sony color TV with an accompanying Betamax. Its Stop-

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Action-Replay Button allowed him total control over his electronic world. Without thought, he flipped on the TV the instant he entered his dim apartment.

A commercial oozed across the screen and snapped into focus. It was the new tenant, seductively mouthing copy for some hair spray. A handsome actor moved into the shot and caressed her raven hair. Nathaniel was overwhelmed by a surge of jealousy. He furiously pressed the sound switch to hear what they were saying. He felt betrayed. It was too late. She and the actor dissolved into an afternoon soap. Betrayal was replaced by cunning. He berated himself for not being quick enough to tape it. He was entranced by her. She was on TV. A bronze goddess seducing him in his 19-inch color world.

As he slid into a steaming tub five minutes later, his mind was still on the new tenant. He began to prepare the script. It must appear spontaneous. He would wait by the pool until she returned. He would tell her how wonderful her commercial was and offer to tape it on his Betamax. Of course, she would be flattered. The scenario played beautifully. They would date, fall in love. It was perfect, in his head.

Smitty paced outside the Koshinara Restaurant atop the Beverly Center's promenade. Sheik Fazi Talla's secretary had asked to meet him there for lunch. Soon the impeccable pinstriped man arrived, carrying an attaché case. Smitty remembered the petite man from the sheik's entourage. He spoke perfect English.

Smitty fussed at his mail-order vest as Atalla gracefully swept up portions of the picturesque cuisine with his chopsticks. Smitty was out of his league and prayed that it didn't show. He needed this job. He was two months behind in the rent and Marie was pregnant again.

Atalla had his mark. "You see, my dear Mr. Smith, Sheik Fazi Talla is a very powerful man in our country. Yet he has, how shall I say, a great feeling of patriotism for our land. It saddens him to know of the civil strife that his people are encountering." He paused and directed his deep brown stare directly into Smitty's pale-blue eyes.

Smitty attempted a weak smile, gave up fumbling with his chopsticks, and reached for a fork.

"Although our short trip to Palm Springs is for land—metaphorically speaking—our business meeting has long-term effects."

Smitty was absolutely confused. Yet he played at listening in-

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tently as though big business deals were an everyday part of his life.

"I hope you've chosen an associate of a discreet nature?" Atalla ventured.

Smitty choked on his rice. "Oh, yes! He's the top driver in the company. Very polished, sir."

Atalla sipped his tea and touched the linen napkin to the corner of his lips. He smiled. "Good."

Nathaniel turned on the faucet and let scalding water pour into the cooling bath. Every tired muscle, sinew, and bone was beginning to relax. He drifted.

"The water is burning me, Auntie! Please turn it off!" the child shrieked, his skin turning red in the scalding, claw-footed tub. Aunt Ruth bent her voluminous body over her scrawny six-year-old foster son. She scrubbed him unmercifully. Nathaniel squelched the cries deep inside his throat. He knew the ritual.

"Keep away from those Hortense girls," she bellowed. "They're filth! Scum of the earth! Look at their mama—men coming and going at all hours!"

"We were just playing jacks, Auntie—that's not bad," he pleaded.

She shook his frail shoulders. "Filth! If you go near that house again, I'll whip you so you'll never sit down again!"

Nathaniel shut off the hot water and poured some gardenia crystals into the bath. Suddenly, the familiar chill pierced him. He felt weak and cold in the steaming water. Saddened, he knew it wouldn't be different: the new tenant would be like all the others.

Human contact had become a marathon of disappointments for Nathaniel. Unconsciously, he programmed intimacy to end in betrayal. This pattern was tripping up his precisely planned world.

The phone rang. It was Smitty.

"I've decided to go for your idea," he said.

Nathaniel smiled to himself. "When?"

"The sheik needs two limos for a trip to the Springs. A land deal. I'll tell Harry they requested you. Meet me at the Beverly Wood with the love match Saturday at nine A.M. Sharp!"

"You're a smart man, Smitty. I'll see you."

Nathaniel hung up the phone and set his digital alarm to ring in ten hours. A vision of the new tenant floated across his mind. She smiled at him from the passenger seat of Celeb-10. He returned her smile and drove deep into the desert. Celeb-10 shone brilliantly in

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the sun. Suddenly, he felt sick. "Don't!" Auntie Ruth's voice reverberated in his ears.

It was 9:30 A.M. The two Celeb limos, with their expensive cargo, careened down Highway 10 toward Palm Springs. Nathaniel's usual confidence wavered. He set the Silver Stretch on cruise-control and strained to hear the conversation that faintly trickled through the imperceptibly cracked divider window.

The sheik, a body guard, Atalla, and Carla were unaware that the divider window was slightly ajar. Carla's syrupy voice melted across the men's halting, thickly accented English. Nathaniel caught bits and pieces. "Drop . . . meeting place . . ." It was hard to make out, but he soon realized that it wasn't a land deal.

Nathaniel's eyes darted between the road, Smitty's limo cruising ahead, and the rearview mirror. He stifled a gasp when Atalla's attaché case flipped open, revealing stacks of crisp bills. He remembered Harry's words, "Too much greed, Nate."

Before he could formulate a plan, the familiar HADLEY ORCHARDS sign loomed ahead and Smitty's limo signaled a left turn onto a side road just past the landmark. Nathaniel released the cruise-control and followed Smitty's lead. Something must be up. This wasn't the turnoff for the Inez Inn. The conversation halted in the rear as Nathaniel followed Smitty's lead, wondering where the rookie was taking them.

A helicopter and two men were waiting about ten miles down the isolated road. The late-morning sun burned white. Nathaniel flashed on *Apocalypse Now*. The helicopter looked like a giant locust waiting to swallow them in the wasteland. A shiver ran through his bones. He pulled Celeb-10 up behind Smitty's parked limo. He was scared. Something heavy was going down. Quickly, covering his nervousness, he stood dutifully at the passenger door as the sheik and his two men slid out and moved forward to greet the others waiting by the helicopter.

Carla came up beside him, laughed, and touched up her makeup. "What's the matter, sweetie? Cat got your tongue?"

He ignored her and pulled Smitty aside. "What's going on?"

"Keep it down," Smitty insisted.

"This is no land deal." Nathaniel didn't lower his voice.

"Don't blow it," Smitty warned, taking Nathaniel's arm and turning him so that his back was to the sheik and the others.

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"I want to know what's going on," Nathaniel demanded, "*rookie.*"

Smitty laughed—and without warning Nathaniel felt a metallic thud at the back of his skull.

With the impact came a rising smell of musk. Suddenly Nathaniel felt pure, free from weight. He called out, but no one paid attention. He watched them dump his limp body into the trunk of Celeb-10.

The sheik took off in the helicopter with the two men. Carla and the others waited in Smitty's limo while he meticulously wiped their traces clean from Celeb-10. Then he radioed in.

"Harry," he said. "I just dropped at the Springs. The sheik changed his mind. I'm heading back. Incidentally, Kronstadt never showed at the Beverly Wood this morning. I know he's your top driver, Harry, but the guy let us down. I think he's been overdoing."

Smitty scattered their footprints with a piece of bramble before driving back to the main highway.

Nathaniel Kronstadt screamed out to Harry Goldfind.

"I'm here, Harry! I'm here!"

There wasn't a sound. Nothing. Only white stillness followed by a whir of circling sand. And then again nothing.

Nathaniel now was completely alone. Pure energy waiting atop an ancient Aztec pyramid.

Waiting.

Waiting.

The sun burned down on the Silver Stretch.

The Highway Patrol discovered the abandoned limo about a week later. They were baffled. Not a sign of life could be found in or around her. Yet she was idling and her gas gauge registered full.

When Harry Goldfind arrived to identify his stretch, he just shook his head. He couldn't figure it out. No one had seen or heard from Nate since the morning he'd left the Celeb lot for the Beverly Wood. But he never radioed in. According to Smitty, he never showed. Strange.

When the authorities questioned Smitty back at the Celeb offices, he played it extremely well. He, too, was plagued by the mystery of the missing driver.

"I can't figure it. He was Harry's top driver." He straightened his silk tie and brushed an infinitesimal speck of lint from his grey-wool Sy Devore suit. "I'm new in the trade, but I've heard how guys burn out and leave the business without a word. Maybe he just flipped out."

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With each of Smitty's lies, Celeb-10's motor would start and stop in the lot below. If you were close enough, you might have discerned the faint whirring sound of its motor echoing, "I'm here, Harry. It's me. Nathaniel."

But no one was close enough.

After a year, Harry gave up trying to locate Nathaniel Kronstadt. He went ahead and bought the new Fleetwoods in the colors Nate had suggested—golds, burnished earth colors. But even with the new Fleetwoods, the old Silver Stretch was the best limo in the fleet. It ran like a top and never needed repairs.

Who would have believed that Nathaniel had metamorphosed into the only thing in this world he wasn't afraid to love? And Celeb-10 would keep Harry's company in the black for years and years. Like he'd always said to Nathaniel Kronstadt: "Go for the long dollar, Nate. The long dollar."

*CARRIED AWAY*

*by MARK GRENIER*

Said a kidnaping victim named Sue
To her handsome abductor, "It's true
That I've never known crooks
Who could move me with looks,
But I must say I'm taken with you."

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a *NEW* short story by

**JOHN F. SUTER**

*The sheriff walked to the three trucks and studied them closely. "Can't read the license plates for mud." He picked up a small cut branch and used it to rub mud from each plate. "Color's not West Virginia. Out of state."*

*The tractor driver, Hal, was not perturbed. "Things get pretty messy when you're off the hard road. What's the difference where we're from?"*

*A fine and intriguing story from John F. Suter, whose non-series stories and whose Uncle Abner stories are such a solid contribution to EQMM . . .*

# AND THEY HAULED IT AWAY TO THE MILL

***by JOHN F. SUTER***

When Arlan Boley pulled into his carport and switched off the engine, he heard the chain saw.

The car radio had been on when he left the paved road, drove down the short gentle grade on his gravel lane, and turned onto the level bench of the hill where his house stood. A country baritone was singing an old tune.

"Oh, they cut down the old pine tree
And they hauled it away to the mill—"

Boley cut the radio switch and the ignition switch in quick succession as the car stopped in the center of the port. He started to close the car window when he heard the saw.

His wife, Geneva, heard it, too. She turned toward him.

"Sounds like somebody's cutting timber over at Gilbert's."

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The two children in the back seat started to talk. Boley held up his right hand. They subsided.

"Not so sure it is at Gib's," he said.

His wife's brown eyes widened. "Over here?"

Boley made no direct answer. He turned to his eleven-year-old son in the back seat. "Carl, hop out there and look down our road into the woods. See are there any fresh tracks from heavy equipment."

The boy, whose body was just beginning to string out, jumped from the car and ran back to the point where the drive had turned toward the house. His sister, Martha, two years younger, popped from the other side of the car and ran after him. Boley went to the trunk and began to unload suitcases. Geneva stepped to the back door of the house and unlocked it.

The children came running back.

"No tracks, Dad," Carl shouted.

Martha put a period to it. "Not one."

"It must be over at Gilbert's," Geneva said from inside the screen door.

Boley handed the children their bags and picked up the two others. His broad, heavily tanned face was set in thought. Then he shrugged and went into the house, a three-bedroom frame cottage.

He was a man just under six feet in height, deceptively lean until it was noticed that his shoulders were unusually wide and his muscles like wire rope. He had crinkly blond hair which he had passed on to his children.

His wife was holding the door open for him. As he passed her, he muttered, "Can't help thinking we came back from the Fair too soon. We wouldn't usually be back till after dark." He looked across at her. "Maybe it's a good thing."

Geneva looked up at him, her brown eyes slightly troubled. Her mouth, usually stretched in good humor, was sober. She pushed distractedly at her light-brown hair. "Bill and Janet could hardly put us up the second day this time," she said. "Not after that call last night saying her mother was rushed to the hospital in Clifton Forge with a heart attack."

It was their custom each August to attend the West Virginia State Fair near Lewisburg, in the southeastern part of the state not far from the Virginia line. Although they lived only an hour's drive away, they made a two-day holiday of it, staying with Geneva's brother and his wife in Ronceverte, near the fairgrounds. This year,

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they had come home late in the morning of the second day because of the crisis in the other family.

Boley carried the bags into their bedroom. Been doing this like clockwork, year in and year out, he was thinking. He began to change into blue shirt, jeans, and work shoes. You can count on us not to be here, he said to himself.

Geneva appeared in the bedroom doorway. "What would you like for lunch?"

"Go ahead and fix for you and the kids," he said, tying a shoe. "I'll throw together a sandwich or two later."

"You're going to have a look," she said, making a statement.

"I have to know," he answered.

"Don't get into anything."

"Not if I can help it."

He went out of the house and along the hillside to his toolshed. He unlocked the door and stepped inside. A pair of walkie-talkies was on a shelf close to his hand. He picked them up, locked the shed again, and returned to the house. He handed one instrument to Geneva.

"Turn it on about five minutes after I leave with the jeep," he said. "I'll call in, one way or another." He grinned. "I don't think you'll have to come to my rescue."

He kissed her lightly and went out the back door again.

Boley owned a seventy-acre tract of land on a paved secondary road. The shape was like a wedge truncated and rounded some distance before it reached a point. The paved road, which was populated at only about eight families to the mile, rounded the smaller end of the tract.

About twenty acres of Boley's land formed a grassy semicircle from the road down to a small run at the bottom of a 300-foot gentle slope. Looking downhill, the house, Boley's equipment, and his outbuildings were on the left. The house faced away from the road. Where his lane turned to the house, a dirt road went on, straight down through the meadow to the run, crossed on a culvert, and went up into woods on the steep hillside which formed the larger part of his acreage.

Boley went from the house to the level, graveled section where he kept his equipment under a protecting roof supported by pillars. Starting with a sturdy old tractor years before, he had built up an impressive collection of bulldozers, tractors, end-loaders, and miscellaneous farm equipment. He made a good living doing heavy work

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of several types for small farmers who couldn't afford the machinery. He employed no permanent workers—there were always enough teenage youths willing to hire for single jobs.

He made no attempt to farm his own land. He used the grassy meadow for hay, a cash crop he easily sold to horse breeders or to farmers who came up short. He also had two other hayfields on level patches in the acreage across the run. These were screened from general view by the woods which covered most of that hillside. Near his house was a small garden and some fruit trees. His wife worked the garden, as well as cutting the grass around the house with a riding mower.

Boley looked inside his jeep, which was parked facing the lane. He stared at the miscellaneous tools behind the rear seat.

Loggers, he thought, can be touchy.

He went into his toolshed, unlocked a cabinet, and took out a carbine. He wasn't a violent man and only used the gun for hunting. However, he felt that it might be useful. There were shells in it, he knew, but none was in the chamber.

He carried the carbine to the jeep and carefully laid it on the floor of the front seat, not far from his right hand, after checking that the safety was on. He wondered if Geneva had seen him take the gun. She would worry, but it couldn't be helped.

Boley switched on the motor, wondering if the timber cutters would hear him coming. Except for an occasional car on the road, the usual sounds were only those made by the birds or an infrequent small plane or helicopter checking utility lines. An ordinary radio or TV could sound like a theater performance or a stadium crowd. He hoped that the saws would drown his approach.

He drove away from the house and turned down the slope toward the run. Even at this time in mid-August, the run contained ample water. The annual period of violent thunderstorms had ended not many days earlier. Boley was glad he had built the culvert over the stream several years back. He crossed the water without undue noise.

On the other side of the run, he turned right and drove westward for about three hundred feet, then stopped and cut the motor. From here on, saplings and brush made walking mandatory.

Boley opened the door of the vehicle carefully, swung to the ground, and relatched the door without slamming it. He removed nothing except the walkie-talkie.

A meandering path led away from him into the brush, following

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the bank of the run. The track had been created by dogs and various animals of the woods. Boley's family used it intermittently, especially after walnuts were down in the fall. Several large walnut trees were scattered throughout Boley's woods. One of the largest was in the direction of the saw's whine.

Boley moved quietly along the path, checking the ground frequently. He had occasionally encountered copperheads here. He had no relish for such a distraction today.

The view ahead became clearer as larger trees took over and the brush thinned. Then, seeing sky where this had previously been impossible, Boley's suspicions were confirmed before he even saw the men.

In the next seconds, he did see them: three timber cutters, working at the large walnut tree that once had blocked the view of the sky from where Boley stood. Two were busy with chainsaws, stripping away the smaller limbs. The third sat on a large tractor on the opposite side of the run. None of the three saw him.

For several seconds, Boley stared at the felled tree. The butt faced him, the crown pointing west, the trunk with its length along the upper bank of the run. He stepped backward quietly, then walked back to the jeep. He switched on the walkie-talkie.

"Neva."

There was a brief pause. The instrument cracked.

"Yes, Arly?"

"I was right. There's three of 'em in here. They've downed the big walnut along the run. Cuttin' her up right now."

"How did they get in?"

"Through Gib's. Took down a section of fence."

She made no immediate answer. He knew the reason.

Finally, "I don't like what that means, Arly. I always thought we got along all right with Gilbert and Helen."

"Neva, we don't know what it means. Not yet. Meantime, I want you to do this: call the sheriff's office. Tell 'em I've got some timber thieves at work over here. Tell 'em to pull in and block Gib Williams' lane."

"That might take a while, Arly. You know how the party line is this time of day."

"Use the CB."

"All right." Before she left: "Arly, you be careful."

"Don't worry. I'm staying right here until I hear from you . . ."

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Boley leaned against the front bumper of the jeep. He stared down at the run. After a wait of about five minutes, the walkie-talkie rasped and Geneva's voice sounded again.

"Arly?"

"I'm here."

"I got through on the CB. Sheriff McKee is on his way over himself. Everybody else is out somewhere."

"You tell him where I said he should pull in?"

"Yes. He wanted to know why you said that."

I don't know, Boley thought. It just figures. "He'll find out," he said. "You say he's on his way?"

"He's supposed to be."

"All right. I know what to do, then."

"Arly," his wife said.

"Yeah?"

"I saw what you put in the jeep. I'll say it again: watch what you're doing."

"What else?"

"Nothing I can do, I guess." He heard her sigh. Then, "Arly, if you do shoot that thing, try to watch where you aim it. You know how Helen Williams is, always walking around the woods looking for plants to move to her own property. She's out more than she's in the house."

How likely is *that*, he thought, with all this racket going on. "I'll watch it," he said. "Got to go now. Keep tuned, in case."

He opened the vehicle and took out a shovel, an axe, and the gun. He made a bundle, with the gun between the tools to make it less noticeable, and clipped the walkie-talkie to his belt.

When Boley came out of the brush near the fallen tree, he was noticed by the man on the tractor. Boley nodded to him and leaned his tool collection against a big sycamore nearby. He scanned the activity slowly, with apparent interest, as though seeing it for the first time.

One of the sawyers stopped cutting and turned off his saw. Boley stepped over to him. He was a short, dark man. His rounded cheeks reminded Boley of a chipmunk's. "Hi," Boley said, raising his voice over the sound of the other saw. "Got a nice tree there."

The dark man was expressionless. "Yeah, we do."

From the corner of his eye, Boley saw the other sawyer become

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aware of him. The second man stared at him, then glanced quickly at the man on the tractor. He turned back to his work and went on.

"You buyin' at a good price?" Boley asked the dark man.

"We give good value."

It wasn't easy to keep his voice raised and also seem casual, but Boley tried. "Who'd you buy it from?"

The dark man took time to answer. Finally, he jerked a thumb over his left shoulder. "Man up there. Name of Williams."

The other sawyer stopped his saw. He sat on his heels and listened.

"That's funny," said Boley, dropping his tone to normal. "That tree's not his to sell."

"It ain't?" the dark man said. Boley could detect no surprise.

The other sawyer got up. He was only a little shorter than Boley, but he was heavier. He wore horn-rimmed glasses and a Massey Ferguson outdoor cap. His grey work shirt was heavily sweat-stained. "Whose tree was it?" he asked. From his accent, Boley placed his origin farther south. He also noted the use of the past tense.

"Mine," he answered. He let the short answer hang.

The two sawyers exchanged glances.

"Well, I don't know about that," the taller man said.

"I do," Boley said.

"We cut down one walnut up closer to the house yest'day," the dark man said. "We was told we could cut this'n today."

Boley looked at them without replying.

"That was Williams," the tall man said casually.

"You'd better look at something," Boley said, pointing behind them. "Take a look at that fence."

The two men turned and looked back up the edge of Boley's grassy field to a place where a corner of the snake fence had been opened. The locust rails had been pulled apart and scattered to make room for the tractor to come through.

"I don't know about where you came from," Boley said, "but around here, fences are used to divide property."

The dark sawyer shook his head. "We was told to go ahead and make that hole. Said the fence was put to keep the cows out from comin' in where they didn't belong."

Before anyone else could speak, a harsh voice cut in. "Doc. Jack. Get back to cuttin'. We'll be here till Christmas if we don't get on with it."

Boley looked up. The third man was still sitting on the tractor, but he had decided to take a hand.

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"I don't think there'll be any more cuttin' here unless I say so," Boley said. "Maybe you haven't been listenin'."

The man on the tractor was built much the same as Boley. He had a mass of wiry, curly brown hair and a thin-lipped mouth. His right cheek was distorted by a wad of chewing tobacco. He was wearing a dirty white T-shirt, stained khaki slacks, and heavy work shoes. Boley guessed his age to be in the early thirties. He stared at Boley with contempt. "I been hearin'. None of it says that tree was yours."

"That won't take long to prove. We just go talk to Gib Williams."

"Talk all you want. We got work to do." He raised his voice. "C'mon, you two. Get the lead out."

"Okay, then," said Boley.

He walked back to the sycamore and picked up the carbine. He worked a shell into the chamber, but left the safety on. He turned around and took a position where the other three were in the narrowest field of fire.

One of the saws had started again. "All right!" Boley shouted. "Knock it off!"

He had their attention. The taller sawyer shut off his saw. "That makes a difference," he said.

The man on the tractor spat over the left side of the machine. "Like hell it does. The tree's down. He can't put it back up. Go ahead."

Boley looked at the dark man. "You know who the worst fool in the world is?"

His short opponent hesitated, then nodded. "Maybe."

"Who?"

"Anybody who'd give an argument to a man holdin' a gun."

Boley grinned. "You win the stuffed teddy bear." He looked across to the tractor. "Some people are smarter than others."

"Maybe," said the man on the other side of the run. "But you needn't think you'll shoot me and get paid for that tree. No way."

Boley looked at the dark man again. "Takes a lot of convincin'."

The sawyer shook his head. "No. He's already give money for it to them other folks."

Boley shifted his attention again. "That right?"

"That's it. She's paid for. You want money, you collect from them. We don't pay twice."

Boley lifted the gun and stabbed vaguely at each of them with the muzzle. "I think we'd better take a walk. Let's go see Gib Williams."

The tall sawyer laid down his tool. "Better do what the man says,

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Jack." He looked at the third man. "Hal, you done all the arrangin'. Let's go get this settled."

The man on the tractor shrugged. He reached for the ignition key and put it into his pocket.

The two sawyers turned and splashed across the run. Boley held the gun high above his head, gathered his muscles, and charged down the bank. He leaped over the water, landing easily.

Jack looked at him and the gun. He looked pointedly at Boley's feet. "Maybe some people ain't as smart as others around guns, either." Boley reddened, but said nothing. As they started up the field toward the fence, Jack spoke over his shoulder. "You won't see this Williams, anyway. He ain't there."

Feeling that he'd been led into something, Boley gave them no satisfaction. "Oh? Where is he?"

"Dunno."

"Is his wife there?"

"Yeah. She is. She's the one Hal paid."

"All right. We talk to Helen, then."

The dark man went on, "She's the one that told us to take down the fence and get that tree."

Boley listened, but said nothing. He had decided they were trying to confuse him. It could be sorted out when McKee arrived.

The group walked through the gap where the snake fence had been pulled apart to let the tractor through. Boley conceded to himself that the lumberjacks could have been misled, because most of the land on the other side was pasture. Gilbert Williams' house, an old, two-story white frame, stood about two hundred feet away. It had a modest yard on all sides, set off by a low chain-link fence. There was a small garden in the back, beside a boarded-over "dug" well.

There were two poplar trees in the front yard for shade. A heavier stand of trees ran along the fence line to Boley's right as they came into the property from the rear. A walnut tree larger than his own had stood there. It was now cut down, only the stump remaining.

The driveway into Williams' property was between the house and the trees. At the rear of it stood two large, flat-bed trucks. Walnut logs were piled on the bed of one truck higher than the cab, secured against shifting by heavy chains. The other truck was empty. Just waitin' for my tree, Boley thought.

He looked around, noting that the brush had been slashed and

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beaten down where the first tree had been cut up and skidded over to the flat-bed. Then he observed that a third truck, a one-ton stake-body, sat in front of the others. For hauling the tractor, he decided, when he saw a portable ramp leaning from the tail of the truck to the ground.

He was herding the three lumberjacks toward the back door of the Williams house when the sheriff's sedan pulled into the driveway and stopped, blocking access to the main road. The motor had barely stopped when Warren McKee climbed out.

"Boley," he called, "your wife says you've got a disagreement!"

Boley grinned. "Three of 'em. Caught 'em poachin' a big old walnut of mine."

The man from the tractor leaned against the metal fence. "Not our fault. We didn't know it was on his property."

The sheriff had walked closer. He was a spare man, deeply tanned. "Is that a fact? There've been a lot of walnut trees disappearin' around here when folks weren't home. Somebody's been gettin' 'em. The beavers aren't that good."

He walked to the three trucks and studied them closely. "Can't read the license plates for mud." He picked up a small cut branch and used it to rub mud from each plate. "Color's not West Virginia. Out of state."

The tractor driver, Hal, was not perturbed. "Things get pretty messy when you're off the hard road. What's the difference where we're from?"

McKee walked up to him and stared. "What I've just seen doesn't have to mean a thing, mister. Somebody could be doin' it to you and Boley both. We'd better have a talk with Gib Williams."

"I'll see if he's in," Boley said. He went to the back door of the house and knocked. It was opened almost immediately by Helen Williams.

"Is Gib here?" he asked.

"No, he's not."

"Any idea when he'll be back?"

Uncertainty showed in Helen Williams' dark eyes. She was a slender brunette in her early forties. Her face had almost a classic symmetry and her appearance was almost compulsively neat. She had never had children and her figure was still good.

"I don't have any idea at all," she answered. "He went over to his cousin Rome's—he didn't say when he'd be back."

Boley turned around. "Warren, we got us a problem. Gib's not

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here. Helen says he went over to Rome Allen's and there's no way of knowin' when he'll show up back here."

"It's a long haul over to Rome's," McKee said thoughtfully.

Boley turned back to Helen. "I caught these three woodpeckers makin' logs out of my big walnut tree nearest your back line. They claim they thought it was one of yours."

She leaned against the doorframe. "I don't know why they'd think that."

"Said they were told it was."

"Gib must have told 'em, then—I don't know a thing about it."

"One of 'em said that you were the one, Helen." He turned and indicated the dark man, Jack. "He said you showed them where they could take down the fence and go through."

"He's lying, then."

Boley looked at her steadily. She returned his stare unperturbed. He turned and walked back to the sheriff, motioning him off to one side, out of earshot.

"You heard that?"

McKee nodded. "I did. Any ideas?"

"Why don't we go over what we know about Gib and Helen? Take him first."

"All right," said the sheriff. "He's a bit older than she is, but not as much as he looks. Was a miner up until about ten years ago when that slate fall caught him. Been livin' on disability ever since because of what happened to his back. But—" he looked hard at Boley "—there's some that claim he can do more than he lets on. You live next, here. What do you think?"

Boley rubbed his chin. "Hard to say. The two of 'em are either good at stretchin' that disability or he's pickin' up some on the side."

"Does he keep her on a tight leash? I'd think it'd be hard to accept Gib, him havin' to wear the back brace and shuffle around. His disposition must be crippled, too."

"I couldn't say," Boley admitted. "He's not as sour as you'd think. He gets out and around."

"Changin' the subject," McKee said, "I think these three over there are at least some of what we've been lookin' for. Three things have bothered me: who's rustlin' walnut trees, how they know where to find 'em, and how they know when nobody's home."

Boley looked around, observing the debris left after Williams' tree had been cut up. He saw the deep ruts left by the trucks and the heavily ribbed tracks left by the tractor. As a user of heavy equip-

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ment, such things were familiar to him. He didn't expect them to tell him the truth about his tree.

"Why don't you get on the CB?" he said to the sheriff. "Have somebody call Rome Allen and get Gib back here."

"Good idea," McKee said. He walked toward his car.

Boley went back to the house.

"Helen," he said, "I understand you got a check for my walnut tree."

She looked at him in puzzlement. "They gave me a check this morning. I thought it's what they owed us for our tree."

Doc, the tall sawyer, spoke up. "We give you the money for your tree yesterday."

"To Gib, you mean."

"No, lady, to you."

Understanding smoothed her face. "Oh. I took it to give Gilbert."

Boley cut in firmly. "Helen, why don't you get both checks and bring 'em here."

She hesitated. He pressed the matter. "If there's two, one of 'em's bound to be mine."

She turned away from him and went into the house.

Boley addressed Hal, the tractor driver. "You wrote the checks. For how much?"

The other man made no answer. Finally he said, "What the hell, you'll see 'em, anyway. Three hundred for this one here. Two hundred for the one we just cut."

"Practically for free, both of 'em."

"You got big ideas, mister. It's what they're worth."

"I don't know what Helen'll do," Boley told him, "but I'm tearin' that two-hundred-dollar check up and you'll write me one for eight hundred. I just had all my walnuts assessed by Soil Conservation. Eight hundred's what that tree's worth."

The door opened and Helen Williams reappeared with two slips of blue paper in her hand. "Here they are," she said.

Boley looked at them. They were for three hundred and two hundred dollars, dated a day apart. He took them to the tractor driver and showed them to him.

"Is this your signature?"

"It is."

"And this company, Tapiola Lumber, is the one you work for?"

"Yeah."

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McKee returned from his car, to Boley's relief—he wanted to go into the house but he hadn't wanted to leave while McKee was busy.

The sheriff was annoyed. "We got through to Rome Allen's. Gib's not there. He hasn't *been* there. Rome doesn't know a thing about him." He drummed his fingers on the butt of his revolver. "Know what I think? Gib's lit out for someplace and left Helen holding the bag."

"Why don't you think about it a bit?" said Boley. "I want to make a phonecall that might give us a little more."

He crossed again to Helen Williams. "Helen, I want to make a long-distance call. Might I use your phone? I'll pay the charges."

She considered it. "Come on in," she said finally. "The phone's in the kitchen."

The telephone hung on the wall of a spotless kitchen. The room had only one bowl in the sink, but it had a dishwasher and a general air of efficiency. Boley leaned against the counter and lifted the telephone off the hook. As he had guessed, the party line was in use. He listened, then cut into the conversation. "Mary Ballard, is that you? This is Arlan Boley. I need the line for about five minutes for a long distance. Could I have it? . . . Okay. Thanks."

He had been busy locating an area code in the directory while he talked. He hung up the phone briefly, removed it again, then dialed the area code he needed, followed by the directory-assistance number.

The operator came on. "Directory Assistance. What city?"

He told her and she asked him for the customer.

"Citizens National Bank."

After a pause she read him the number, he thanked her, broke the connection, and dialed again.

A woman's voice with a pronounced regional southern accent answered. "Citizens National Bank."

"Bookkeeping Department, please."

In a few seconds, an older woman's voice with a similar accent answered. "Bookkeeping."

"Yes," said Boley. "My name's Boley. I'm calling from West Virginia. A Mrs. Gilbert Williams has endorsed a check for two hundred dollars over to me. It was made to her by Tapiola Lumber Company. It's signed by a Harold Lanham. I have two questions: is there enough money to cover the check, and has this Lanham the authority to sign it?"

"One moment, sir."

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In a surprisingly short time she was back. "Mr. Boley? The answer to both of your questions is yes."

"All right, thank you. Oh—one more question. This Lanham gave Mrs. Williams herself a check for three hundred dollars. She wants to know if her check and mine are both covered."

"Yes, they are." A note of exasperation came into the bookkeeper's voice. "Mrs. Williams should surely know that by now. The company has never defaulted on any of its checks to her before, as often as she's asked us about them."

"I guess she doesn't like to take anything for granted," Boley said. "Thank you, ma'am."

He was whistling between his teeth as he walked to the back door. Helen Williams was sitting on the top back step. He sat down beside her.

"I talked to that lumber company's bank," he said, looking slowly around the yard.

She turned and looked at him. "What about?"

"The two checks you let me have."

"I don't understand."

"Just wanted to know if they're good and if that Hal over there is allowed to sign. They're okay." He wasn't watching her face. He had always liked Helen, although he had always been wary of Gilbert.

"Well, of—" she began. "Oh, I see. I thought there'd be no question. Gilbert seemed to trust them."

"I wonder why. Because these guys show up with three big trucks and some equipment? Gib never seemed that ready to take anything at face value."

As he talked, he was cataloging: trumpet vine on the side of the house, lilies near the fence by the paved road, trilliums (he remembered) growing near the snake fence separating his land and theirs. None of these had grown on the Williams property until the last two years.

He looked up and called to the sheriff. "Warren, when did somebody start sneakin' trees out of this county?"

McKee, leaning against the trunk of the sedan, considered the question. "Year before last, I'm pretty sure."

"Then I think I can answer how they knew where to find trees and when to get 'em. And these three you have here are at least part of the outfit."

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"Well, sure, you caught 'em at it."

Boley nodded. "Yeah, but they claim not to know it was my tree. They put it on Helen, here. But she says they're lyin'. —Only they're not."

He turned to her. "Helen, you're always out in the woods. You're out locatin' walnut trees, isn't that right?"

She made no reply.

"When you bring back somethin' like that trumpet vine, you've really been fixin' it in your head where there's a walnut tree, haven't you? The plant you bring back is just a cover-up. It hasn't any more meaning than an excuse to be out in the woods. When you know where the tree is, you pass the word to somebody like this Lanham, telling him just where to find it. After they get that tree, he sends you a check, doesn't he? It's been goin' on for about two years. That's how long trees have been disappearin'."

The look she gave him was all pure innocence, overlaying outraged indignation.

"All this time we've been neighbors, Arly Boley, and now you say a thing like that about me! There's no more truth in you than there is in those three there."

He was not disturbed. "That bank I called must be liars, too, then. Said you've had more than one check from this Lanham here."

"They must mean Gilbert. I never did, until now."

Boley looked around casually. "Where is Gib, anyway?"

"I already told you."

"He's not there, Helen. They haven't even seen him," the sheriff said.

Boley looked at the tractor driver. "Lanham, you got any ideas of Williams' whereabouts?"

The driver opened his mouth, reached in with two fingers, pulled out his wad of tobacco, and tossed it aside. "No. Why should I?"

"You've done business with him," the sheriff said. "You're on his place."

"That don't make me his nurse," Lanham answered.

Boley walked over to the sheriff and took his arm. They walked several yards away from the others, where they could talk in low tones without being heard.

"Warren," said Boley, "I have an uncomfortable feelin' about Gib."

"I think he's in this up to his eyeballs," the sheriff answered, "but it doesn't make me uncomfortable."

"I think he's here somewhere."

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"You might be right," the sheriff agreed. "But I can't do anything about it. I'd have to have a warrant, because I haven't heard one solid fact tyin' him to this."

"I don't think I'm gettin' through to you," Boley said. "I think it would take more than a warrant to find Gib."

The sheriff eyed him attentively. "Such as?"

Boley waved a hand at the beaten-down brush where the first walnut tree had been cut up, at the chips and scraps, at the ground churned by the tractor's belt. "It might take some hand labor or some of my equipment."

McKee stared at the disturbed earth, then he lifted his head and looked first at Helen Williams, then at Lanham. "You do think of things, don't you, Arly?" he said quietly. "How about you gettin' me a glass of water out of Helen's kitchen while I think this over."

Boley nodded and walked to Helen. "Sheriff wants a drink. You mind if I get him one?"

Her upper lip curled. "I'll get it. I don't want anybody in my house that talks to me like you do."

While she was inside, McKee took off his hat and ran his fingers through his hair. "You said trees have been cut around here for about two years, Arly. I guess that's about right."

"Close enough. Now, about Gib—"

The sheriff held up his hand. "Let's hold that a bit."

The door opened and Helen came out with a glass of water. McKee walked over and took it from her. He took a swallow. "Good water," he said, holding up the glass. "Don't see any iron in that. Not like what used to come out of that old dug well over there."

"They drilled pretty deep for this one," Helen said. "Close to two hundred feet."

"That makes a difference," the sheriff said, then stepped back to include them all in what he had to say. "Now, Helen, and you three chain-saw jockeys, listen to me. Boley here has got it into his head that maybe Gib Williams has met up with what they call foul play. If that *is* the case, and any of you knows about it and didn't have a hand in it, you'd better realize that it can be bad for you. Innocent or not, it can be bad for you. Think about it.

"Now, while you're thinkin', I'll run through what I suspect Arly has put together. He thinks that this business of ripping off trees has been puttin' money in Helen Williams' pocket and she's decided she no longer needs any part of Gib. Instead, she has a thing goin' with one of you three sunbelters and she's arranged to skip out of

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here along with this next load of logs. Only Gib has tumbled to it and confronts everybody. In the ruckus, he comes out loser."

A flurry of protests began, but McKee ignored them.

"Boley thinks Gib is planted over there where you all cut up Gib's walnut. He figures that the ground's been buggered up so by your tractor that nobody'd ever suspect a body was under there. He wants to dig it up and see."

The tractor driver exploded. "If he thinks that, give him a teaspoon and let him dig up every inch of it!"

"All right!" the sheriff shouted. "I told you how it looks! Anybody have anythin' botherin' 'em they want to get off their chest—if what I've said's the truth?"

There was no answer.

"Well," McKee said to Boley, "you might take that to mean that things ain't the way you figured. Of course, it's a little early for somebody to come out and try to save his own skin."

"Facts speak for themselves," Lanham growled.

The sheriff still addressed Boley. "Trees started disappearin' about two years ago. That's about the same time Williams got his drilled well and its pump. He was able to fill in that dug well and cover it. That tell you something?"

"Lumber-company money," Boley answered.

"Money that was bein' paid to Williams' *wife*. Does that tell you anythin'—knowin' Gib?"

"She cashed the checks somewhere else, or set up a bank account in her name somewhere else. A front for Gib."

"When you were inside on the phone, did you notice any other things that you might not expect?"

Boley thought.

"A dishwasher. A clothes dryer."

McKee nodded. "And, while Gib benefits, who'd you say those were bought for?"

"Helen."

"And I'll bet there's more things like that around this house if we'd look. What that says to me, Boley, is one word: partnership."

"Partners have fallen out—even killed each other."

"They have. But if they knocked off Gib Williams and lit out, their operation in these parts would be done. It is, anyway, but that's an accident."

Boley had been pyramiding the evidence ever since McKee had started, using the drilling of the well as a base. He had been mentally

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piling it on the removable cover of the old well. He moved away from the sheriff and headed for the garden.

McKee's voice trailed him. "Go ahead, Arly. You'll be savin' me the trouble. Go look in the old well and tell me what you find."

Damn, Boley thought, not so smart after all.

The well cover was neatly made and covered with aluminum sheeting. It fit snugly over the top of the old well.

Boley lifted the cover and set it on the ground. He looked into the well.

"Well, I'll be dipped," he said.

The well was filled in with dirt and rubble, but only to within five feet of the top. An old stool stood on the top of the fill. On it sat a man with uncombed brown hair, wire-rimmed glasses, and nondescript clothes that bulged oddly above the waist. The bulge was produced by a back brace.

"Gib Williams!" Boley said. "Hello, Gib."

"I got nothin' to say to you," the man in the well grumbled.

"I have plenty to say to you," Boley snapped. "For openers, you can have that wife of yours endorse that last check over to me. That's three hundred dollars. That, plus the one they tried to give me, will make five hundred dollars. The tree is worth another three hundred. I figure you're the one who ought to cough it up. You pointed them at that walnut in the first place."

The man in the well climbed painfully to his feet. "You'll play hell gettin' it from me, Boley," he said.

## DETECTIVERSE

### *PENITENCE*

*by PATRICIA A. RED ELK*

They charged me with grand larceny
And locked me up in jail—
I wish I'd really done the crime
So I could pay my bail!

*© 1984 by Patricia A. Red Elk.*

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a *NEW* Mrs. Craggs story by

**H. R. F. KEATING**

*"Well, what's wrong with young love?" Mrs. Milhorne demanded, withdrawing from the window, where she had been watching a young couple on a bench underneath one of the huge spreading plane trees below.*

*"Oh, there's nothing wrong with a bit o' love," Mrs. Craggs said. "Provided it's at the right time an' in the right place. But Berkeley Square coming up to tea time ain't the right place and it ain't the right time . . ."*

# MRS. CRAGGS HEARS THE NIGHTINGALE

***by H. R. F. KEATING***

"Pom pom pom *pom*, pom pom pom *pom* . . . and a nightingale sang in Berkeley Squaaare."

"I dare say it did, dear," Mrs. Craggs said from down on her knees swabbing the kitchen floor of the prestige offices of the Zinc Development Association, Berkeley Square, London W.1, where she and her fellow worker, Mrs. Milhorne, were beginning their afternoon tasks. "I dare say it did, but it never made no noise like you."

Tall and bony, Mrs. Milhorne abruptly halted the sweeping, slow foxtrot she had been performing in accompaniment to the music in her head.

"I got a very nice voice," she said. "My rendition o' that song was what first drew Mr. Milhorne's attention. A lovely voice, he told me. Small, but lovely."

Mrs. Craggs forbore to ask whether it was that voice remaining small but ceasing to be lovely which had been responsible for the

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never mentioned departure long ago now of Mr. Milhorne. After all, she and Mrs. Milhorne were friends, had been for years, and it wasn't fair to try friendship too far, truth or no truth.

Instead, she gave a final swish of the cloth to her floor, rose to her feet, swilled out the cloth in the sink, and began to take out of the big cupboard all the teacups and saucers which at half past three exactly two pretty tea-girls would take round to the various offices in the building, together with two chocolate digestive biscuits, just as at eleven in the morning precisely they had taken round coffee, together with two plain Petit Beurre biscuits.

Mrs. Milhorne did not give Mrs. Craggs any help. She was instead standing by the narrow window of the kitchen, looking down onto the big tree-shaded expanse of Berkeley Square itself.

"Yerss," she said after a little. "Yerss, he's edging nearer. He's edging nearer. I said he would, and he has. He's edged a whole lot nearer."

"Who's edged nearer what?" Mrs. Craggs said. "Half past three's edging a whole lot nearer us, I do know. An' them old Zincs'll be wanting their teas."

Mrs. Milhorne ignored the second part of Mrs. Craggs's remark and leaned her bony frame a few inches farther out of the window.

"Oh," she said dreamily, "I do like to see it. I do like to see young love."

"That," said Mrs. Craggs. "I might have guessed it."

"Well, what's wrong with young love?" Mrs. Milhorne demanded, withdrawing from the window.

"Oh, there's nothing wrong with a bit o' love," Mrs. Craggs said. "Provided it's at the right time an' in the right place. But Berkeley Square coming up to tea time ain't the right place and it ain't the right time."

"You and your teacups," Mrs. Milhorne answered, making a vague move in the direction of the chocolate digestives, which she was accustomed to place on the cups' saucers in a way that she privately considered showed great artistic skill.

"Anyhow," she said, "I think it's her lunch hour. I think she gets her lunch hour late. I seen her before."

"Oh, yes," Mrs. Craggs said, "an' she don't eat a speck o' lunch, either, but goes moonin' about with some young feller, I know."

"No, you don't. First time she's met him."

Mrs. Milhorne thrust bony shoulders out of the window once more.

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"Oh, yerss," she said. "They're talking now. Talking, and sitting ever so close."

She maneuvered herself back in and gave a long deep sigh, mostly over the packet of chocolate digestives she had just opened. "The first meeting," she said. "I remember it was just the same meself. Edging."

"I thought he come up and said you'd got a lovely voice, but small."

"That was Mr. Milhorne. That was later. Mr. Milhorne weren't the first. I was the belle o' many a ball, I was. In my day."

Mrs. Craggs, carrying a tower of cups round to the second tea trolley, glanced out of the open window. She had no difficulty in seeing the young man and the girl Mrs. Milhorne had been giving her running commentary on. They were sitting on a bench inside the Square, underneath one of the huge spreading plane trees whose branches cascaded delicately down in the soft spring air. She was pretty, no doubt about that. Pretty as a picture, Mrs. Craggs thought, with her neat head of swinging blonde hair and her crisp pink-and-white candy-stripe dress with the white cardigan thrown across her shoulders. Just the way I was meself once upon a time.

Or, no, she acknowledged, the lass down there's something out of the ordinary. Prettier than a picture. He's a lucky lad if he's getting off with her.

She paused a moment longer to give the young man a rigorous inspection. And wasn't altogether sure whether he came out of it well or not. He looked all right, in some ways. He was tall and had a good pair of shoulders on him. Too much hair, of course, but most of them had that nowadays. Still, he looked nice and clean, and bursting with health, too.

But those clothes. A pair of jeans all ragged at the bottoms. A pullover with frayed sleeve-ends. And, if she wasn't mistaken, a shirt collar that was as worn as her old piece of swabbing rag. A girl as pretty as that deserved something better. And what was that he had on the bench beside him? A violin case, it looked like. A battered old violin case. What was a young man doing carrying round a violin case? Full of bombs, likely as not.

"Ain't they a lovely pair?" Mrs. Milhorne's voice came from behind her. "Pom pom pom *pom,* pom pom pom *pom* . . ."

Mrs. Craggs put down her tower of teacups with a sharp clatter. "Be some o' those Zincs singing another tune altogether in Berkeley Square in a minute," she said.

Mrs. Milhorne hurriedly dabbed chocolate digestives by the pair

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on saucer after saucer. "Yeah," she said, "it's a pity though that nightingales don't sing in the day—otherwise one might sing fer the two o' them now. Lovely, it'd be."

Mrs. Craggs snorted. "Nightingales not sing in the day?" she said. "Lot o' nonsense. If you'd been brought up in the country like what I was, you'd know better. Nightingales sing just when they wants, an' good luck to 'em. Though I don't suppose it's very likely as you'd get one singing here in Berkeley Square no more, not now."

"No," Mrs. Milhorne agreed. "All this environment. They've all gone, the birds have. All gone."

"'Cept the pigeons," said said Mrs. Craggs. "Dirty beasts."

In the days and the weeks that followed, Mrs. Craggs and Mrs. Milhorne saw a good deal of the two young people who had met under the big plane tree in the Square. Even the very next day it was clear that the talk the young man with the battered violin case had succeeded in having with the more than pretty girl with the neatly swinging blonde hair had been the beginning of something.

For one thing, Mrs. Milhorne spotted him waiting for her long before her lunch hour was due. "I expect she's a secretary kept late," Mrs. Milhorne said. "Managing director's secretary, that's what she'll be, pretty as that." And for another thing, as soon as the girl did appear she made straight for the very same bench under the delicately cascading plane tree, and the smile she gave when she realized he was there was plain to see even from across the busy roadway.

The day afterward, when the two of them sat together on the bench it was with his arm round her shoulders straight away, and you could see, despite all the roar and racket of the traffic, that they were talking together and laughing together nineteen to the dozen.

Sometime during the second week of it, Mrs. Craggs made a small discovery, one which she did not lose much time in passing on to her fellow worker.

"Secretary, you said—managing director's secretary, weren't it?" she murmured over Mrs. Milhorne's bony shoulder as the latter leaned out the window to look at the pair of them once more, her long pale face moony, as if a nightingale really was singing out there instead of the traffic jostling and snarling.

"Yerss," Mrs. Milhorne answered absently as they both pulled in from the window. "Bound to be a top secretary. When you're as pretty as that, you get the job to go with it. I was thinking o' being

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a secretary once. Only I couldn't learn the shorthand, not with me nerves the way they've always been."

"Saw her coming out o' her place o' work this morning," Mrs. Craggs said.

"Oooh, did you? Where was it? That big car showrooms over the way? Or was it the posh flower shop? She might be an assistant there instead. Assistant going on to be manageress when she's a bit older. Yerss, I like that. A pretty face among all them pretty flowers."

"Chambermaid," said Mrs. Craggs.

Mrs. Milhorne dropped a chocolate digestive and it shattered to fragments on the floor.

"Yes," said Mrs. Craggs. "I was passing that big hotel just down beyond the far corner of the Square there this morning and out she come."

"Well, that don't mean nothing. I expect she's the manager's secretary there. All among them rich guests an' all."

"Come out talking to another girl," said Mrs. Craggs. "Talking about making beds and cleaning baths, they was. Her name's Patty by the way."

Mrs. Milhorne put some more chocolate digestives on saucers with less than her customary artistic finesse.

"Well," she said after a while, "it don't make him any less keen on Patty, her being that."

"Being what?" Mrs. Craggs asked, a little wickedly.

"Being what you said."

It was true enough. If the boy with the violin case did know what Patty did for a living—and from the way they talked to each other all the time when they met, talked and talked and laughed and laughed, it was pretty well certain to Mrs. Craggs and Mrs. Milhorne that she had told him everything about herself from the day she was born onward—it clearly made no difference to him. Even Mrs. Craggs had to acknowledge that she had never seen two such lovebirds as the pair of them every day as they sat there under the plane tree.

She wondered sometimes, however, about how much to do with himself he might have told Patty. It was the violin case that chiefly worried her. The boy always had it with him, but he never opened it. And Mrs. Craggs couldn't quite get out of her mind the thought of bombs or something else nasty every time she saw it.

Until one day.

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It was an afternoon that was, for some reason, rather quieter than usual on the roads round the Square. The traffic, for once, was not racketing and jostling but flowed smoothly and easily. There was even a fashion photographer at work in the spring sunshine just outside the Square's railings, making a tall, statuesque model walk up and down on the pavement and snapping her time and again against the background of the peaceful gardens.

"I was going in for a model once," Mrs. Milhorne remarked.

And suddenly, as Mrs. Craggs and Mrs. Milhorne watched, the boy did open the battered old case, and in it there wasn't the trace of a bomb or of anything else but what a violin case should have in it—a violin. The boy lifted the instrument out of the old case with delicate care and put it to his shoulder. And then he began to play. Play to Patty.

The sound of the melody—it was clearly a love song even if neither Mrs. Craggs nor Mrs. Milhorne could put a single word to it—floated up to them sweet and rounded and true above the quiet whirring of the cars and taxis circling the Square, and before very many moments had passed Mrs. Milhorne was wiping the tears from her long pale face and even Mrs. Craggs was constrained to give a quiet sniff.

"I know what he is now," Mrs. Milhorne said. "He's one o' them great violinists. I bet he plays every day at that Wigmore Hall place on the other side of Oxford Street. I bet he does."

But that very afternoon, going home by Tube for a change, Mrs. Craggs discovered that once more her friend was laboring under a misapprehension. She decided next morning, when they arrived to do their early office-cleaning stint, that it would be kinder to break the news before Mrs. Milhorne found out for herself. "He's no great violinist, I'm afraid," she said.

Mrs. Milhorne bridled.

"Well, what is he then?" she demanded. "I s'pose you're going to say he's a hotel waiter next."

"Worse," said Mrs. Craggs. "Hotel waiter's a steady job. And respectable."

"Well, what's he do that's not respectable? An' Patty so pretty she deserves a hotel manager, never mind waiter."

"Busker," said Mrs. Craggs. "There he was, just inside the tunnel into Bond Street Tube, playing away on that old fiddle of his. What they call 'country' now, I think, though it's not the country I was brought up in. Silly American stuff."

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"Perhaps he was just practicing there," Mrs. Milhorne suggested.

Mrs. Craggs gave a rich snort. "With a cap full o' pennies there in front of him, an' ten pences, too? Be your age."

That afternoon the traffic round the Square was back to its normal racket and the boy's violin did not come out of its battered old case to sing its strangely sweet love song. Mrs. Craggs was quite glad of that: she felt it would be a bit cruel on her friend to be reminded of that shattered dream of the concert violinist and the humble chambermaid.

And a day or two later she got to learn that Mrs. Milhorne was not the only one to be disappointed over what the boy did in order to make ends meet. The first sign of trouble came during her own lunch break. She had gone out with Mrs. Milhorne and taken sandwiches and the evening paper into the Square Gardens because it was an especially nice sunny day. Suddenly Mrs. Milhorne, who had been chatting away loudly enough about her nerves, broke off and thrust her face close to Mrs. Craggs's ear.

"It's her," she whispered, in a draught like the back-end of a vacuum-cleaner. "It's her. Patty."

Mrs. Craggs looked round.

Patty had evidently been away from the hotel just past the far corner of the Square on some quick errand or other, and she was now hurrying back. But on that wonderfully pretty face beneath the swing of neat blonde hair there was something more than a look of simple intent to get back to work as rapidly as possible. There was an expression of puzzlement. And more than a hint of anger, too. Had she passed by the side entrance to Bond Street Underground station and seen someone there, someone making a living by busking?

Mrs. Craggs made a point of getting well ahead with her preparations for tea for "them Zincs" when they got back so as to be able to devote more than her usual time to looking down at the lovebirds under the big spreading plane tree. She had a feeling that all was not going to be as full of laughter and sweet looks as it generally was.

She was right, too.

No sooner had Patty arrived at the bench where the boy with the battered old violin case was waiting for her than she exploded. Up above and with all the noisy cars separating them, they could not of course hear a word that was said. But they hardly needed to. It

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was perfectly plain that Patty was bawling the boy out, up hill and down dale. And from the way her finger darted out and pointed like a shaft of fury at the violin case, it was clear that this was indeed the seat of the trouble.

The boy plainly tried protesting, but it was clear that he must in fact have been deceiving Patty all along about what it was that he did. And she was not going to put up with it.

"Quite right, too," said Mrs. Craggs.

"But they were so much in love," wailed Mrs. Milhorne.

"Well, if he really loves her, he'll do something about it. He'll get himself a proper job and let her know he has. Why, he could go down the street to that hotel and get himself taken on there. Kitchen porter. Anything. But some respectable way of earning a living. And then he'd be sure to bump into her there, and things'd be as right as rain in two twos."

Mrs. Milhorne sighed. "Oh, it'd be lovely. Lovely."

But it quite soon began to look as if it never would be lovely at all. First, Patty wheeled round and marched off back toward the hotel—"an' she's not had a bite of their rolls," Mrs. Milhorne moaned—and then something altogether worse happened. Two police constables who had been parading slowly past the Square railings suddenly began to hurry, almost ran round to the gate, went in, and went straight across to the plane tree where the boy with the violin case was sitting stupefied on the bench. At once they began to question him, and soon it was clear that they weren't being too polite about it.

"What's he done?" asked Mrs. Milhorne. "Whatever has he done?"

"I know what they think he's done," Mrs. Craggs said.

And she pulled from her sagging shopping-bag her copy of the *Evening News* and pointed a lean finger at its banner headlines.

THE STOLEN STRAD. *Wigmore Hall Theft from Maestro.*

A moment later it looked as though her guess was right. The policemen made the boy open his old violin case and then, despite his evident protests, they lifted the instrument from it and pointed out eagerly to each other some marks on the back.

"But he had that violin long before the Strad was stolen," Mrs. Milhorne said. "Or— Or— Oh, dear."

A look of complete dismay came onto her face.

"Yerss," she said at last. "Yerss, that'll be it. He stole the Strad from the Wigmore Hall, threw away his own rotten old fiddle, and

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put the stolen one in the case instead. Why, the dirty devil. I always knew he wasn't what he seemed. Said it a hundred times, didn't I?"

"No," said Mrs. Craggs, "you didn't."

Down below in the Square the two policemen were hustling the boy away.

Mrs. Craggs looked at them. And before they had quite got out of sight, heading in the direction of the police station at Vine Street, a look of determination came onto her creased and lined nut-brown face.

"Yeah," she said. "Yeah."

She snatched her hat from the peg on the kitchen door and crammed it onto her head.

"You'll have to see to them Zincs' tea on your own today," she said to Mrs. Milhorne. "I got business to attend to."

And without another word she hurried down to the ground floor of the glinting prestige office building and out into the Square.

Mrs. Milhorne was late for work next morning. Almost an hour late.

"It was the News," she explained to Mrs. Craggs when at last she did arrive. "I kept waiting to hear the News to see if they'd got anything on it about the boy and the violin. There wasn't nothing in the paper, and you'd of thought there would be after all the fuss they made yesterday. I mean, 'Stolen Strad Arrest,' that'd be news, wouldn't it?"

"It would be," said Mrs. Craggs. "If there'd been any arrest."

"What you mean? We saw 'em, didn't we? Saw them two coppers with our own eyes."

"But that weren't all we saw with our own eyes," Mrs. Craggs replied.

"What you mean?"

"Well, didn't we see that boy—his name's Alan, by the way, Alan Lambert, and he's the son o' that millionaire, Sir Peter Lambert, only he quarreled with him and left home—well, didn't we both see him take his violin out of his case days before that Strad was stolen? An' didn't we both hear him play it, sweet as a nightingale?"

"Well, what if we did?"

"This what. It was plain as a pikestaff to me that that boy had got a top-notch violin in his case all along. Busking at Bond Street Tube he may have been, but that was no tuppenny-hapenny fiddle

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he had, not by the way he took it so gentle from its case, and not by the sound he got out of it when he played."

Mrs. Milhorne did some thinking.

"So you went along to Vine Street an' told them," she said. "An' they believed you."

"Not a bit of it. That's why I never came back all afternoon."

"But what then? They've let him go, haven't they? Young Alan."

"They let him go. When we traced that photographer."

"What photographer? I don't remember no photographer."

"The one taking fashion pictures that day. Just when Alan was playing to Patty. Color pictures they were, and they showed his own violin a treat. Wasn't no arguing about it after that."

"Cor," said Mrs. Milhorne. "So it all ends happily, after all."

Mrs. Craggs smiled then, a great big broad grin cracking her old nut of a face.

"It does end happy," she said. "But more than you thought. You ought to have been here at six this morning, like I was. You really did ought."

"But why ever?"

"Because at six this morning, when it was quiet as quiet outside an' might have been right in the middle of the country, I heard the sound o' violin music. Music as sweet as any you ever listened to, right out there in the Square."

"It was him? It was Alan?"

"It was. And something more."

"What? What ever?"

"You look out o' the window here. Look right across the Square, and what do you see at the far end, past the big block o' posh flats?"

Mrs. Milhorne thrust her scraggy neck as far out of the window as she could.

"Only the top of some tall building," she said.

"A top with little windows in it?"

"Yes. There's windows."

"Them's the windows right at the top of the big hotel there. The windows of the rooms where the maids an' that sleep. And one o' them windows opened a bit after the music started. It opened wide and someone leaned out and waved. Waved and waved."

"Patty. It was Patty."

"'Course it was. An' something more."

"What more? There couldn't be no more, not after that."

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"There was. After the music had been going a little, I heard another sound. I swear I did."

"What was that? What ever was that?"

Mrs. Craggs looked at her friend. There was a tear in the corner of her eye.

"I heard it," she said. "I did. A nightingale sang in Berkeley Square."

## DETECTIVERSE

### *GOOD HELP IS HARD TO FIND*

*by BARBARA JOYCE WEIL*

Mrs. Craggs is able to show
Just how far common-sense clues can go.
There's only one flaw
In her fight for the law—
She doesn't do windows, you know.

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**a *NEW* short story by**

**PIERRE BOILEAU and THOMAS NARCEJAC**

**first publication in the U.S.**

*Thomas Narcejac and Pierre Boileau began to write together in the early Fifties. Their first collaboration,* Celle Qui n'Etait Plus, *published in 1953, was adapted for the screen by Cluzot as* Diabolique. *A few years later, Hitchcock filmed his adaptation of their novel* D'Entre Les Morts, *as* Vertigo.

*Georges was just at the age where a boy hates carrying packages, avoids going out with his parents, and thinks that girls are always laughing at him. And to be always stuck with Toto, as Georges called his brother to his parents' dismay—a Dennis the Menace if there ever was one! The burden of it, the humiliation . . .*

# TOTO

***by PIERRE BOILEAU and THOMAS NARCEJAC***

"Georges, your brother is ready. Hurry up!"

Georges grumbles, stalling for time.

"I'm putting two francs on the mantel. Buy him some candy."

As if they couldn't leave him alone in this heat. But there's no way out. Furiously, Georges shoves back his chair.

"And walk in the shade. You know how delicate Maurice is. —Do you understand, Maurice darling? Do just what Georges tells you. And, Georges, be sure to hold his hand when you cross the street."

"Look, Mama," Georges shouts, beside himself, "I should know by

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now what to do! I've heard it often enough! Come on, Toto, get moving."

"I forbid you to call your brother Toto. If your father ever heard you say that!"

"So what? He can't. Toto, walk in front of me."

He slams the door and the elevator comes up to meet them. Georges feels the anger festering inside him like an abscess. He feels shooting pains in his chest.

"Don't touch!" He slaps Maurice's hand, which is edging toward the buttons on the wall. Maurice loves to make the elevator stop between floors.

I'm sick of this, I'm sick of it! Georges repeats to himself. They think I'm some sort of a nursemaid!

Out in the street, he stops for a minute. He knows that up there, on the fourth floor, there's a half opened window and his mother's eyes watching him. He takes his brother by the hand. He squeezes it as if he is wringing out a washcloth. Maurice groans.

"You don't like that?" Georges mutters. "Good."

Once past the corner, he lets go of his brother's hand.

Georges is just at the age where a boy hates carrying packages, avoids going out with his parents, and thinks that girls are always laughing at him. And to be always stuck with Toto . . .

He crosses the street without a word of warning. But Toto follows three feet behind.

On the sunny side, the heat is stifling. Georges stops in front of a shop window and looks at the flippers, the tanks, the big diving goggles. Next to him, Toto is sucking his thumb. If only Toto would come down with a terrible headache, something that would keep him in bed for weeks! Day after day of freedom, with no explanations to give, no reports to make.

"Your brother?"

"He was good."

"Well, then, tomorrow you will take him to the Punch and Judy show."

The burden of it—the humiliation. It couldn't go on. Georges brooded. Everything was for Toto, the poor little lamb, the little darling, the pet. They slipped their hand inside his collar to see if he was perspiring, they felt his head, his hands. "Throw me a kiss . . . Who's going to beddy-bye? . . . Who's a sweetie pie?" And me,

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Georges thought, what do I matter? I'm the elephant driver, the servant, the slave.

Toto bends down to pick up a cigarette butt. It's his latest obsession. Georges doesn't stop him. Let him suck on it—let him swallow it if it makes him happy. Georges wipes his face. He's the one suffering from the sun. He crosses back into the shade. Toto is still with him.

The streets are beginning to slope toward the Seine. The passers-by are strolling, the beautiful weather reflecting on their faces like a happy surprise. And Georges tells himself he could seriously try to lose Toto. It would be easy. But where would that get him? Father, mother, grandfather, grandmother, everyone would blame it all on him. "You have no feelings . . . You're jealous of your brother . . ." Once found, Toto would regain his throne and everything would start all over.

No. That wasn't the right way. Maybe there *wasn't* any way.

Here is the river, its barges, its lights. Gently splashing reflections dance on the arches of the bridges. Georges goes down to the river bank. No one will bother him there. Toto is fascinated by the water. He sits down, legs dangling. From time to time, he points to a boat, a string of barges. Pretty . . . Pretty . . .

"Sure, sure, pretty—enjoy them and leave me alone." Georges lights a cigarette. To their right is a sleeping tramp, to their left a fisherman who from time to time scratches his sunburned skin. Life has ebbed away—it rumbles in the distance, leaving Georges alone with a thousand unthinkable thoughts. A little nudge would be enough. The water is deep at this spot: the fisherman's cork is high on his line, more than nine feet.

But what excuse could he give? Could he say it was Maurice who dragged him there? Why not? Weren't Toto's whims his commands? Anyway, someone would fish Toto out again. At the last minute, there would surely be some gallant life saver. Then it would be enough to pile Toto, shivering, into a taxi and rush him home. There would be a terrible scene, but at least it would be the end of these hateful trips. They'd never trust their precious Toto to his brother again.

Georges watches Toto squeezing his hands between his thighs and rhythmically banging his heels on the stone embankment. Just a

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tiny nudge. The tramp is sound asleep. The fisherman is oblivious to the world. Georges moves closer. Toto looks up.

"Thirsty," he says.

"Oh, really? Well, you'll get a drink, that's a promise." Georges is right next to him. He holds his breath, gathers his strength.

It all happens so quickly. The water fills Georges' mouth. He raises one arm. The current is already sweeping him along but he catches a glimpse of Toto's round face, his idiot grin. At eighteen years old, he is as strong and agile as a gorilla.

Above Georges the sky is so blue just before, from all sides, the green water darkens over him.

**(translated by Irene R. Ilton and Estelle R. Green)**

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*In the middle of the file, Judge Marshall came across two police photos of Alice Fielder, one taken front face, the other from the side. She was a most pleasant-looking woman, not yet forty. Her face seemed vaguely familiar to him. He tried to remember why, but nothing came . . .*

# THE DECISION

**by JOE L. HENSLEY**

By his tenth year on the bench, Judge Cleve Marshall had become a judge's judge. His decisions were sought after all over his area of the state. Bright lawyers filed change-of-venue motions and requested him. Life was interesting and busy. He had never married and now, at forty-three, thought he never would. There had been women, and still were, in and around the small town of Avalon where he'd lived all his life. He maintained an active life style. He played fair golf and better tennis. But much of his time was spent, black-robed, listening intently to evidence, studying casebooks for precedent, or mulling over knotty decisions.

He wasn't surprised, therefore, when he was chosen to hear the Fielder murder case. He'd read about it in the area papers and wondered if it would fall to him to sit as presiding judge in it. He *was* surprised, however, when Prosecutor Hanks and Defense Attorney Baron announced to him, at an omnibus hearing, that he'd hear it without jury.

"Now hold on, boys," he said. "I know and admire both of you and I've read a bit about the case in the local paper. I can maybe see one of you wanting a non-jury trial, but not both of you."

Lester Baron rose and smiled at him. "Judge, this woman is accused of deliberately poisoning her husband and daughter. My feeling is that a jury would be swayed by the mere fact she's accused, would disregard the flimsiness of the evidence, and would want to punish Alice Fielder because her husband and child are dead. So I'm asking that you alone hear it. My client has agreed."

George Hanks nodded. "The prosecution is willing to go along

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because the evidence is circumstantial, with inferences arising out of inferences. We think it requires a judicial mind to realize the full perfidy of what Alice Fielder did to her family." He smiled like a half open knife. He'd always been an effective but vicious prosecutor.

"So be it then," Judge Marshall said. "How long do you foresee it will take to try the matter, gentlemen?"

"A few days. Certainly no more than a week," Baron said. "Much of the evidence could even be stipulated, but won't be because of a circumstance. That circumstance is, of course, a separate page asking for the death penalty. Prosecutor Hanks is also willing to go along because of that possibility. Mrs. Fielder is a very handsome woman. He believes a jury might convict her but not sentence her to death. And he wants the death penalty."

Hanks nodded. "Will you do it, Judge?"

Cleve Marshall folded his hands. "I've never turned down a case, but I want both of you to know I'd like to turn this one down. My difficulty is that I can find no reason in the judicial code of ethics why I should."

They set a June trial date.

"One more thing, Judge," Baron said. "Do you know Alice Fielder?"

"Not to my knowledge. If she grew up around here, I *might* know her. I vaguely knew her deceased husband."

"She was a Linip before she was married," Hanks told him.

"I don't remember the name," Marshall said. "I still might know her, but it doesn't mean anything to me. If I find out anything which might bias me before trial, I'll get out."

Both lawyers nodded, satisfied.

After they'd gone, Judge Marshall read the file. There wasn't much there to satisfy his aroused curiosity. There was the information charging Alice Fielder with killing her husband and daughter. There were some discovery motions from both sides and lists of witnesses, most of them the expected people—the police officers who'd made the original run to the Fielder home after the frantic call from Alice Fielder, doctors who'd examined the bodies, a toxicologist who'd run tests on body fluids, some neighbors.

If the prosecution was correct, Alice Fielder had poisoned her husband and fifteen-year-old daughter. Judge Marshall wondered what kind of monster could do that. Then, in the middle of the file, he came across two police photos of Alice Fielder, one taken front face, the other from the side. She was a most pleasant-looking

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woman, not yet forty. Her face seemed vaguely familiar to him. He tried to remember why, but nothing came. He got his magnifying glass out of his desk and studied the face, giving particular attention to the eyes. They stared at the camera. He couldn't tell whether they were sorrowful, bewildered, or merely cunning. It still seemed as if somewhere, some time long ago, he'd seen it—and forgotten it.

Doctor Leybeck was an aging medical-expert boor. Marshall had heard him many times and had once stated, only half in joke, that the man could put a jury to sleep while describing the results of an axe murder. Leybeck was a forensic pathologist much used by the prosecutor.

When the veteran police officer who'd made the run had seen the two victims, he'd called Doctor Leybeck and he had arrived on the scene in the company of the coroner.

"The poison was nicotine, pure nicotine, distilled somehow either from some old pesticides we found in a shed outside the house or from tobacco itself. Edgar Fielder managed a tobacco warehouse and it was the height of the season when it happened. Both victims were found in their bedrooms. The dishes from a table in the dining room had been removed, but traces of the poison were found in the food remaining on two of the dinner plates. The family had eaten some sort of Mexican meal, very hot and spicy. After Sergeant Jones read her Mirandas to her, Mrs. Fielder said it was enchiladas and she had prepared it."

"What effect would nicotine have upon someone who ingested it?" the prosecutor asked.

"A fatal dose could be as little as one drop. It would first stimulate, then depress the cells of peripheral autonomic ganglia, particularly the midbrain, and the spinal cord. Initially, there'd be a burning of the mouth, throat, and stomach, then nausea, tachycardia, elevation of blood-pressure, respiratory slowing, coma, and finally death. These symptoms would follow each other with great rapidity. And from my tests, that's how Edgar and Joan Fielder died." The doctor stared out into the warm, crowded courtroom. It was almost full. Murder cases still drew crowds.

"Did you do tests on the plates found in Mrs. Fielder's kitchen?"

"Yes."

"And the results?"

"The food on them was liberally doused with pure nicotine. Enough

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to kill ten people. I estimated a time of death for each victim about ten to thirty minutes after the drug was ingested."

Lester Baron asked on cross-examination: "You saw nothing in the house to indicate that Mrs. Fielder had prepared some sort of apparatus to distill pure nicotine?"

"No. I didn't look."

After Doctor Leybeck, there came a parade of neighbors and acquaintances of the Fielders. They testified concerning public quarrels and threats. Close neighbors testified to the sounds of strife emanating almost constantly from the Fielder home and to occasional marks they'd seen on Mrs. Fielder after the battles. Once her arm had been broken. Once she'd apparently scalded her husband so severely with hot coffee that he'd been laid up for a week. The daughter had sometimes come to school with bruises and lacerations.

The most telling witness for the prosecution was a next-door neighbor, Janet Robbins. She and Mrs. Fielder were close.

"She said one day she was going to kill Edgar," Mrs. Robbins said.

"Did she say it more than once?"

"Oh, yes. Many times—every time they had a fight. He was always picking on her or the daughter. Joan ran away several times, but was found and sent back home."

Co-workers at the warehouse testified that Mrs. Fielder had been in and out of the place many times and that she and her husband had had arguments there. They attested to Mrs. Fielder's interest in tobacco and the availability of raw tobacco leaves in the warehouse. As one co-worker described an attempt she'd made to hit Fielder with a hammer while at the warehouse, Judge Marshall studied the woman from the bench.

She seemed calm enough now. She was wearing inexpensive clothes and smiled only when her lawyer asked a telling cross-question. Her features were good, her teeth perfect. She had apparently been difficult to live with, and yet it seemed to have been a two-way street she and her now deceased husband had so tempestuously ridden upon. He'd hurt her and she'd hurt him in return. The daughter had probably been dominated and kept in fear by both of them, but there were questions about that which weren't being asked and that puzzled him.

A teacher had said of her: "She was kind of withdrawn and strange, you know? She was bright enough in some areas, uninterested in others. Her grades ran from Fs to As. She liked science and reading. Until around the time she died, she was like a little girl, though

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she'd matured physically over the last summer vacation. She didn't take part in any of the extra-curricular activities at the school. She read a lot—those dreadful things they write for young adults now. She came to school, she went home. She was a pretty child, but she seemed afraid of boys. Several times she broke down and cried in class. I took her aside and asked her if she was ever beaten at home, but she'd never admit it to me or any of the other teachers, even when she came to school with bruises."

Police Sergeant Jones testified about going to the house and finding the two bodies in the bedrooms. When he had arrived, Mrs. Fielder had shown almost no emotion. She'd politely invited him inside the quiet house, saying her husband and daughter had gotten sick after supper and were in bed. She willingly allowed Jones to enter the bedrooms where he'd found the still-warm bodies.

"I read her the Miranda warning and she said she'd fixed the meal. When I asked her other questions, she said she'd like to have a lawyer first so I stopped."

"Did you search the house?"

"Yes, later. That's when we found the poison on the closet shelf in her bedroom, sitting right out in plain sight."

"Did you find anything to indicate that it had been distilled inside the house?"

"There were some old chemistry things down in the basement—you know, bottles and retorts and tubing. One of those kid sets you can buy in a toy store. We analyzed them, but they were clean. I checked the local night school and found out Mrs. Fielder had taken some chemistry courses there, but I don't know if the stuff we found in the basement was hers or her daughter's." He shrugged. "Or her husband's."

A teacher from the night school testified that Mrs. Fielder had taken enough courses to understand how to distill the poison and would be likely to know of its highly toxic nature. Avalon was a tobacco town and workers in the warehouses had suffered chronic, but curable, poisoning, and those poisonings had been reported in the local newspaper.

The prosecution rested.

Defense Counsel Baron made the obligatory motion for judgment and Marshall politely overruled it, pointing out that there'd been three people in the Fielder house, that two of them were dead, and that a prima facie case had been established.

"You may begin your evidence," he said.

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Baron nodded and went back to the defense table. For a time he and his client held a low-voiced discussion—seemingly amiable until Marshall saw that Baron was becoming red-faced and somewhat angry.

Finally, Baron approached the bench. "Could we break until tomorrow morning? I need to talk with my client concerning her defense."

George Hanks got to his feet. "I'll have to object, Your Honor," he said smoothly. "Mr. Baron and his client have had some months to prepare strategy."

Marshall nodded and looked at his watch. It was almost four. "True, but I'll give Mr. Baron until the morning."

At the courtroom door, Marshall saw Alice Fielder look back at him—calculating him, perhaps. A tiny memory came and again he thought he might barely remember her. There had been a time after his freshman year in college when he'd summered as a lifeguard at the local municipal pool. There had been dozens of girls around that summer, some older than he was, some his age, many younger. He thought he remembered a face like Alice Fielder's somewhere in that lost crowd. He wondered if she'd been one of his "summer girls." It had been a lot of years.

In the morning, a sullen Baron rested without introducing any evidence. The two lawyers made closing argument and Marshall returned the defendant to the dirty, aging county jail while he considered the case.

For days, he sat in his law library, smelling the dampness and decay and rereading his case books. He vacillated. Sometimes he was sure Alice Fielder was guilty but at other times he was not. He did know that two people had died and that a third who'd been present had not and that that was strong circumstantial evidence.

On a day in early July he ordered the court back into session. The prosecutor came smiling into the courtroom and the defense counsel arrived scowling. Neither expression lasted long.

"I find," Marshall announced, "after careful consideration, that there is insufficient evidence against the defendant to convict Mrs. Fielder of murder. At times, in considering this case, I have had the feeling that the defendant probably committed the crime, but I have never been able to say to myself, beyond a reasonable doubt, that she committed the double murder of her husband and daughter. Therefore, I now order that she be released from custody."

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He nodded down at the deputy who was guarding Alice Fielder. "I'm sure she has personal belongings at the jail. Return her there and allow her to pick them up." He nodded at her. "You're free, Mrs. Fielder. I hope I've done the right thing. I know I've done the legally right thing."

She nodded back at him, not smiling. There were tears in her eyes. It was the first sign of strong emotion he'd observed in her.

He didn't see Alice Fielder for some months after the trial. Lester Baron told him she'd gone off somewhere to escape the publicity. There had been a substantial amount. Marshall had caught the brunt of it, smiling and repeating "Insufficient evidence" until the public interest finally moved on to fresher news.

He encountered her at a restaurant he favored. He'd never seen her there before. She sat at the bar, drinking a tall icy drink, wearing a tailored dress that set off her figure and face far better than the drab apparel she'd worn in the courtroom. Her eyes were as he remembered them, lost and forlorn, and it struck him that, strangely enough, she might be there hoping to speak with him.

"I see you survived my release," she said when he went over to her. "I want to thank you for it." She smiled without humor. "Some in town still think I'm guilty. I'm about to move away—I've given up hope for a normal life here."

He nodded and waited, sensing she wanted to say more.

"Why did you find me innocent?" she asked. "My lawyer was sure you wouldn't when I refused to take the witness stand."

"You had a constitutional right not to testify," Marshall said. "I found you not guilty because I could see another way the deaths could have happened. Your husband could have poisoned the plates and then gotten a poisoned one by mistake, having meant the poison for you and your daughter. You have studied chemistry, so I didn't think you would leave plates with poison on them in the sink until the police came, invite the police officer in, admit you prepared the dinner, and let him enter the bedrooms without objection." He shook his head. "The only thing that puzzled me about the trial is why you, yourself, didn't say on the witness stand what I'm saying now."

She smiled. "There was a reason. And you have a right to know. I wasn't going to get on the witness stand and tell what happened, not even if I had to die for it, but I'll tell you if you promise you'll tell no one else. I want you to know and understand."

He nodded, his curiosity aroused. Besides, he found himself at-

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tracted to her. He knew she couldn't be for him, but he was still attracted. "You were one of my summer girls, weren't you?"

She nodded. "I didn't think you remembered that."

"It took me a while," he admitted.

She looked into her glass, her face somber again.

"He always beat on us. Maybe it was something that went wrong in his childhood. I could take his viciousness to me, but he was also vicious to Joan. I threw that scalding coffee on him when he was beating her, not me. I could take care of myself, she couldn't. I was physically about as strong as he was. Then, when Joan started to grow up, he changed subtly toward her. He patted her and kissed her and she didn't know how to handle that. It got worse. What he did damaged her.

"Joan carried the plates to the table that night. She must have distilled the poison. The chemistry set was hers—I bought it for her one Christmas when she was about twelve. She was very good at things like chemistry and physics. I heard her tinkering with the set in the basement again in the weeks before it happened and I saw evidence down there that she was distilling something. It never occurred to me . . ."

"One never suspects the obvious," Marshall said. "Or the very young."

"Yes." She nodded. "And I wanted it kept like that. I remembered your kindness when you were a lifeguard. You never really saw me that summer, but I saw you. I loved you that summer I was only fourteen and you were eighteen or nineteen. Love's very difficult at that age. Joan's age. I couldn't sit in your court and say that my sexually brutalized daughter had poisoned her father and herself. I doubted I'd be believed anyway, but whether I was believed or not I couldn't make myself do it. I couldn't for her and I couldn't for me. They were both dead and it was over.

"But I want you personally to know before I move on that you made the right decision. If you can keep it secret I'll be very grateful."

"Where will you go?"

"Someplace new."

He smiled at her. "Stay in touch with me."

"All right." She set the unfinished drink down and got up as if to leave. She looked at him and said again, "All right."

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a ***NEW*** **Scrib Merlin story by**

**RON GOULART**

*Scrib got back to the inn as dusk was giving way to night, after having hung around at the Meet the Authors tent until Detective Ferro of the local police had gotten around to talking to him. There had been five local writers, three Friends of the Library volunteers, and four civilians in the tent when the fatal dose of poison had been slipped into Professor Champion's punch. As of nightfall, none of them had admitted doing the deed or even seeing it done . . .*

# IT'S SO COLD IN CHINA

## *by* RON GOULART

At first Scrib Merlin didn't recognize the dying man.

He was much better dressed than he used to be, looking almost dapper as he lay there writhing on the grass behind the big green-and-white-striped tent.

Scrib had been out at the edge of town, supervising the taping of a television commercial that was using a picturesque covered bridge as a setting. Deciding to walk back to the picturesque inn where he was staying, Scrib was halfway across the late-afternoon lawn of the library when he noticed the sprawled man. He was on his back, thrashing around next to a sign announcing that this was Meet the Local Authors Day at the Brimstone, Connecticut public library.

"Professor Champion!" realized Scrib and went running down the slanting library lawn to him.

Roger Champion was a tall rough-hewn man of sixty, white-haired and bearded. He was wearing a very expensive suit and expensive Italian shoes and his craggy face was a strange greenish color.

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Up in front of the tent a Dixieland band was in the midst of playing "When the Saints Go Marching In."

Dropping to his knees beside the stricken professor, Scrib asked, "What's wrong, sir?"

Champion's glazed eyes looked up at him. "Merlin, isn't it?" he gasped. "Gad, it's been ten years since you were in my dramatics classes at Brimstone and we used to—"

"Fifteen years. Are you having some kind of attack? Is there some medication you—"

"Been poisoned," explained Scrib's old dramatics teacher, gesturing feebly at the paper cup tumbled over on the grass beside him. "Something slipped into my punch. Didn't think it'd be tried out in the open like—"

"Who? Who did—"

"Imagine running into you, Merlin. You were always one of my favorite students. Shame you never got anywhere."

Scrib had slipped his arm around the dying man's broad shoulders. "Hey, in the tent!" he shouted at the blank wall of striped canvas. "Hey, help!"

"I was thinking about you only the other day, Merlin. Odd—"

"Listen, Professor, tell me who did this so—"

"You think of me as a man of honor—but salary's not that princely. My latest book—plugging it here today—is a flop—"

"I'm not doing all that well as an advertising copywriter in Manhattan," Scrib said. "Right now, though, do you have any idea who put the poison in—"

"Been doing things I shouldn't have— Caught up with me—"

"Oh, my God!" A plump blonde woman had stepped out through a flap in the tent. "Oh, dear lord!"

"Quick, get a doctor!" urged Scrib.

Instead, the woman screamed, dropped the fat hardcover novel entitled *Kiss Me, Love Me, and More!* she'd been clutching to her bosom, and fainted. She landed, bouncing slightly once, a few feet from the stricken Professor Champion.

Now others were out into the late afternoon from within the green-and-white tent.

"Don't need a damn audience now," muttered the professor.

"Go get a doctor," Scrib told the half dozen bystanders.

"What's wrong?" inquired a hefty moustached man.

"Poison," answered Scrib. "Hurry up, huh?"

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Nodding, the dark-haired man went running off up across the wide green lawn.

"Merlin, please—" said the professor in a fading voice.

"What?" Scrib leaned nearer the froth-smeared lips.

"Maybe you can do better—make the right decision—" gasped Champion, his voice fluttering. "Here's how to find—what you need. It's so cold in China, the birds can't hardly sing."

"What?"

"It's so cold in China, the birds can't hardly sing," Champion repeated, sighing out the words. "You remember—" His body jerked, arched. Then he went slack and was dead.

A plump man with thinning blond hair came over. "I'm Dr. Denis Gilford—"

"Too late, Doctor." Scrib stood up.

"I'm a Ph.D. sort of doctor," explained Gilford. "The president of Brimstone College. Roger is—was on our staff."

Nodding absently, Scrib said, "I graduated from B. C. Fifteen years ago."

"Before my time. I've only been here three years, coming from a similar position in the Midwest." Gilford was looking down forlornly at the body. "I suppose we'd best notify the police."

"Yes," said Scrib. "That's the standard procedure with a murder."

Scrib's room at the Benedict Arnold Inn was small and looked out on a duck pond. He got back there as dusk was giving way to night, after having hung around at the Meet the Authors tent until Detective Ferro of the local police had gotten around to talking to him. There had been five local writers, three Friends of the Library volunteers, and four civilians in the tent when the fatal dose of poison had been slipped into Professor Champion's punch. As of nightfall, none of them had admitted doing the deed or even seeing it done.

While Scrib'd been out, the maid had tidied up his room, making up the four-poster bed and stacking his loaves of Chemical Farms Old-Fashion-Style White Bread in neat rows atop the antique-looking desk. Scrib had come out from New York this morning to spend two days in his old college town taping three one-minute commercials for Chemical Farms.

"A mistake," he murmured, seated on the edge of the bed and gazing absently out at the darkening pond. "A dire mistake."

Standing up, he paced the small beam-ceilinged room. He walked back to the windows, paced again, then picked up the phone off his

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bedside table and dialed a New York City number. Another dire mistake, no doubt.

The phone wasn't answered until the ninth ring. "Hold on a minute, whoever you are. I don't mean to be rude but I'm in the midst of a crisis." The receiver was dropped on a hard surface. Next Scrib heard lusty Beethoven music booming out, plus an ominous hollow thumping and an exuberant metallic whanging. Abruptly, the music faded, the thumping and then the banging ceased.

"I had to turn down the hi-fi and then that idiot sculptor downstairs was banging on the ceiling with a barge pole because of the *Eroica Symphony* and I also had to go hit the toilet with a roller skate, although actually a wrench or a hammer would be better except I loaned mine to— Who is this, anyway?"

"Salty, don't hang up. It's—"

"Oh, ugh!" remarked Salty Warbeck. "It's you, the unspeakable Scrib Merlin."

"I know you don't much like me, Salty, but—"

"Don't *like* you? I loathe you," she explained. "I'd rather talk to all Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse than—"

"Okay, the last encounter we had I annoyed you."

"You didn't annoy me, Scrib. Rather you filled my very being with chagrin and clammy revulsion. I mean, I ask you to do me a simple favor—"

"That business out on Long Island a few months ago wasn't exactly a small favor," he cut in. "I solved a murder, located a stash of money. Just because the dough got burned to a—"

"Oh, it isn't the money," said Salty. "Well, it is, yes, in a way, but not the losing of it just. What stings me to my innermost core, and I may be slim but I'm just as deep as some of those hefty bimbos you—"

"You're skinny, actually, is what you are, Salty. But the point of this long-distance call is—"

"Where are you?"

"In Brimstone, Connecticut. That's only about an hour's drive out of—"

"That's where you went to college, isn't it? Even though I've tried, because of your dreadful, mercenary approach to life, to sponge every solitary fact about you from my mind, I do seem to recall you attended Brimstone College. Are you back for an alumni gathering, a fun-filled reunion?"

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"No. My ad agency, Amthrax & Associates, sent me out here to oversee some Chemical Farms Old-Fashion—"

"That stuff. I had a loaf of that once and it killed every darn cockroach in my pantry. I found the little things belly up with Chemical Farms crumbs on—"

"Listen, Salty, one of my old professors is dead. He was murdered."

She was silent for a few seconds. "Don't tell me you found him while he was expiring," she said. "Don't tell me he gave you a cryptic dying message."

"I did, though," answered Scrib. "And he did."

"Honestly, Scrib, don't you think there's something awfully wrong and strange with a life in which you are continually and forever stumbling over murder victims who can think of nothing better to do with their last minutes on earth than to impart some dippy phrase to you with their last gasps?"

"Matter of fact, I do," he admitted. "I went into analysis right after that business on Long Island. So far, though, Dr. Gernsback and I—"

"What's your psychiatrist's name?"

"Dr. Egon Gernsback. He—"

"I've never heard of him. Egon Gernsback?"

"No reason you should've. He—"

"Hasn't he written a book, a paperback even? Doesn't he have some revolutionary theory that—"

"No, he's just a psychiatrist," Scrib replied, staring out at the pond. "The thing is, Salty, I want to solve Professor Champion's murder because—"

"Course you do. You probably figure there's a fortune involved somewhere or some shady way you can solve the crime and then blackmail the killer into—"

"Nope, no, really. I'm changing," Scrib assured her. "But since I have this ability, this talent almost, for unraveling mysteries like this one, there's no reason I shouldn't use it. So I intend to solve the murder of my old prof simply because I liked the guy. He was my drama teacher and back when I wanted to be a comedian he—"

"You sound, over the phone anyway and I can't see your dippy face, almost sincere."

"I am. And I need your help."

"My help? Where did you say you were calling from?"

"My room at the Benedict Arn—"

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"This is not, you swear, a sneaky plot to lure me back into your clutches?"

"Look, years ago—fifteen and more—I used to drop over to Champion's place after class quite a lot. Several of us would. We'd drink wine and he'd play us records from his unlimited collection. What Professor Champion collected and loved to play for us and discourse upon endlessly was blues records, on 78 and LP. I don't mean rock and roll or rock stuff, but, you know, ancient black music played and sung by guys with off-key guitars and names like Memphis Fred and Sonny Boy Marschall and Nearsighted Slim."

"There were never any blues singers with those dippy names."

"See? You know this field and I don't. I remembered that when you and I were dating you used to inflict—used to play some of that stuff from your own vast collection, Salty. I consider you an expert on that sort of—"

"Ah, I see it now. The dying message this time involved some old blues singer or a line from a blues song, right?"

"I think so. Champion probably figured I'd paid a lot more attention than I did at those sessions we used to have. There were people around while he was dying and he had to pass on this information in such a way—"

"You don't have to explain the ground rules for dying messages to me, Scrib. I've been through enough of these things with you and, on top of that, I encountered that one myself out there on Long Island."

"Okay, and that time you called on me for help. I dropped everything to rush to your side. Now I need somebody who—"

"I have a full-page spread of cartoons due for the *National Buffoon* in just three scant days."

"This'll only take a few hours."

After a short silence, Salty inquired, "What was the message?"

"I'd rather not blab it out over the phone. Could you maybe come out here tonight?"

"Tonight? Now? All the way to Connecticut?"

"It's an hour's drive on the parkways. Even in that clunky VW of yours."

"And you solemnly swear you've reformed? You want to do this simply to avenge the death of an old friend and mentor?"

"So help me."

"Well, I don't quite believe you, Scrib, but I'm going to call your

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bluff," Salty said. "Give me the directions on how to find my way to that tacky motel you're holed up in."

"Who are the suspects again?" she asked as she guided her venerable Volkswagen through the misty night lanes of Brimstone. She was a slender blonde young woman, clad in jeans and a candystripe shirt.

They were en route to the home of the late Professor Champion.

"All of them can't be suspects." He reached, as best he could in the bouncing, shivering passenger seat, into his coat pocket for the wad of yellow copy paper he'd made notes on. "These are just the people who were in and around the tent at the time. The poison was a relatively fast-acting one, probably started working within a few minutes." He fished out a pen flashlight and clicked it on. "There was the Organic Red Hot Peppers Dixieland Jazz Band, consisting of six—"

"Cute," she commented.

"What's cute?"

"Their name. It's a play on Jelly Roll Morton's band's name."

"I didn't know that. Anyway, they were apparently finishing up a half-hour set when Champion died, indicating none of the band members could've— Left at this next corner."

"Whippoorwill Lane. Everything's got a sylvan name out here."

"It's the suburbs."

"C'mon, c'mon," she urged the car, "you can do it. Sometimes it stalls on curves. Read the list."

"Suppose you just concentrate on the dying message. Don't you have any idea where it's from?"

"A vague notion is percolating in the back of my head," she assured him.

"But you're supposed to be a blues maven."

"I am, but there are thousands of lyrics."

"You do think that's what it's from, though? My feeling is that the professor thought I was attentive to all that stuff back then."

"Yes, it is from a blues lyric. I'm certain, but I just can't put my finger on it. Go on with the suspect list."

"In the tent were Sally Ann Jitney, a rather full-figured blonde lady and author of the bestseller, *Kiss Me, Love Me, and More!* She fainted when—"

"Full-figured? I've seen pictures of her. She's a blimp. No wonder you're always accusing me of being skinny and not having a chance

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of being a girlie-magazine model, the career I really crave. I mean, if she's your idea of just full-figured, then—"

"The other authors present were Alfonso DiRoma, whose new cookbook is *Eat Lotsa Pasta*," Scrib went on. "Virgil Whorf, author and illustrator of a new kid book called *The Pussycat Princess Joins the Navy*. Roger Jericho, a writer I know nothing about, and a local romance novelist whose real name is actually Rosemarie Firebaugh. There were three library helpers, two men and a woman, and four visitors, who were all standing in line to have Whorf autograph copies of—"

"Didn't you say the president of your alma mater was on hand, too?"

"That's right, I forgot him. Dr. Denis Gilford. He— Professor Champion's place is at the end of this road. Drive on by, slowly."

"I don't have much choice on these dippy roads, I have to go slow."

A widower, Champion had lived alone in a modest stone cottage that was nearly hidden by a half acre of brush and maple trees.

Squinting as they rattled by, Scrib said, "No sign of lights or of the police."

"Good. I'll park under those droopy trees up ahead," she said, "and then we can sneak over and break into the place."

"Someone was certainly looking for something." Scrib took another slow turn around Professor Champion's living room.

It was hexagonal in shape, with leaded windows and shelving taking up all the wall space. Nearly all the books had been pulled off their perches and they lay sprawled across the threadbare rug, some open and on their backs and others steepled. Champion's desk, the same heavy dark wood one Scrib remembered from his visits years ago, had been ransacked. Every drawer had been yanked out and upended, leaving a thick scatter of papers, letters, pencils, pens, and paper clips on the floor.

The professor's record collection, however, hadn't been disturbed. Hundreds of albums stood side by side on shelves along the front wall.

By the light of the single floor lamp Scrib had risked turning on, Salty sat scanning the titles. "What do you think they were looking for?"

"Something too big to hide in a record album but small enough to slip into a desk drawer or a hollowed-out book."

"That could be almost anything."

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"True." Scrib settled into a fat armchair, the same one he used to slouch in on those long-ago afternoons. " 'It's so cold in China, the birds can't hardly sing.' What the hell was he trying to tell me?"

"Did you notice his car in the garage when we were sneaking in? A Mercedes, fairly new."

"Yep, and he was wearing a high-price suit, too. That doesn't go with this modest house, these rundown furnishings."

"Meaning the professor discovered an extracurricular source of income recently."

Scrib stood. "He was probably blackmailing somebody," he said. "The victim decided, since Champion had no immediate kin, to knock him off and hope the blackmail would die with him."

"I wonder who inherits his records. He's got a terrific collection. All these Label X ten inches, just about the entire Prestige Bluesville series." She rose to her knees to start scanning another shelf.

" 'It's so cold in China, the birds can't hardly sing,' " Scrib repeated. "Doesn't make a hell of a lot of sense as lines go."

"Lots of blues lyrics are like that. Most of that old stuff was passed around orally for years before anything got recorded. Garbling happened."

"Finding anything?"

Frowning, Salty selected an LP, then two more. "Okay, these maybe," she said. "And this one."

Crossing the room, Scrib put his hand on her slim shoulder.

Salty shrugged free of his touch. "Don't use this crisis as an excuse to get intimate," she warned.

"What have you got?" He squatted, glancing over the blues albums she'd pulled. "Blind Boy Fuller, Blind Willie McTell, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Blind Willie Johnson. How come they're all blind?"

Salty was rubbing a thumb knuckle over her chin. "I've heard that line before and I think, the best I can recall, that it's from either a Blind Willie McTell blues or from one by Blind Lemon Jefferson. I picked the others in case my memory's even fuzzier than I believe it to be. I'm darn sure it's a singer with Blind in his name."

"These guys could've used an ad agency, naming themselves like that. Blind is a negative word to—"

"Let's try Willie McTell." Sliding the record from its sleeve, Salty tapped at the grooves while studying the titles on the label. "Turn on the turntable, will you?"

"Sure." After a few false flips, Scrib got the hi-fi system ready to play.

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"Fourth track, 'Three Women Blues.' "

He obliged and started listening.

"Not Top Ten material," he observed after two verses.

"Hush." When the track ended, Salty shook her head. "Nope, that isn't it. Here, try the first track on this one."

" 'Got the Blues,' " he said, placing the Blind Lemon Jefferson on the turntable.

The song came out dim and scratchy, sounding like it was coming to them across a wide gulf of time. The singer-guitarist had a strong, keening voice and he slurred and swallowed some of his words.

When the third verse began, Salty clapped her hands. "Bingo!" she exclaimed.

" 'So cold in China, the birds can't hardly sing,' " Jefferson sang. He repeated the lines and ended the verse with, " 'You done made me mad and broke my diamond ring.' " Or at least that's what Salty told him the words were. All Scrib caught on the first hearing was the "So cold in China" phrase.

He played it twice more, then turned off the machine. "Okay, we've identified the line."

"Does it mean anything to you?"

"I guess I recall his playing this for us a few times." Scrib was holding up the LP. "He told me the line to make me come and find the record."

"That seems logical."

"Nothing extra written on the label, no code scratched on the disc."

"The name itself, Blind Lemon Jefferson? Does that trigger something?"

"Nope." Sitting next to her on the cluttered floor, Scrib picked up the album sleeve and examined it. "No papers inside, no pictures or anything extra hidden in it or slipped between the layers of paper and cardboard. No special words singled out on the liner copy." He got up, letting the empty album drop to the rug. "Damn. What was he trying to tell me?"

"The quote from the lyric was his way of leading you to Blind Lemon Jefferson."

Scrib wandered to the window. "Why didn't I pay more attention back then?"

"Fifteen years is a long time."

"Yeah, but Professor Champion had faith in me. He thought I'd understand what he was talking about, though nobody else in that tent would."

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"Well, you did understand. In a way. Not that it's gotten us any forwarder, as they're always saying in old British thrillers."

"Scoot over, unobtrusively, and turn off the light."

"Hum?"

"Kill the light."

Casually, Salty walked to the lamp and turned it off. "What's wrong?"

After a moment he answered, "Nothing, I guess. I thought I saw someone out there in the bushes. I guess not, though."

"Shall we depart?"

"Might as well. We'll take the album."

"Since it's so late, I won't drive back to Manhattan tonight. I'll bunk at that quaint inn."

"Good idea."

"But," she added, "in a room of my own."

Scrib, absolutely alone, sat up in bed at a few minutes after 3:00 A.M. "Of course, of course," he said aloud. "That's it. It's got to be."

Leaping from his antique bed, he dressed quickly. Then he eased out of his room and walked rapidly into the night.

The campus of Brimstone College was less than a mile from the inn. Scrib walked the distance in under fifteen minutes, puffing some by the time he arrived at the woodlands surrounding the four acres. He slipped silently into the woods, thankful it was an overcast, moonless night. The night patrolman wouldn't spot him if he was careful.

Scrib hadn't bothered to visit the campus this trip. Walking the old pathways would've only tended to remind him how he'd fouled up his life thus far, how he hadn't done what he'd promised himself he was going to do. Tune in tomorrow for another installment of *Scrib Merlin, Pitiful Wretch*, he said to himself as he walked along a shadowy pathway to the building he was aiming for.

There it was, brownstone and ivy, looking exactly as it had fifteen years ago. Jefferson Hall.

He dashed from the path to the doorway. He stood still, glancing around. No sign of anyone.

The door's lock was a simple one and he got it picked without any trouble, using his pocket knife and a couple less orthodox gadgets he carried.

Once inside, he pushed the door almost but not completely shut. Ready for a quick exit if need be.

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Then he flicked on his penlight. The corridors smelled the same, a mixture of floor wax and college-kid musk.

The art gallery was on the second floor. The door wasn't locked.

The painting, since this was a permanent collection, was still hanging where he'd remembered it. *Three Lemons on a Plate* by an obscure Nineteenth Century American still-life painter.

Holding the light between his teeth, Scrib lifted the framed canvas carefully off the gallery wall.

Turning the backside of the canvas to him, he said, "Yep, I was right." Taped there, with strips of black electrical tape, was a large fat 9 × 12″ manila envelope.

Crouching, Scrib worked the envelope free. After leaning the painting against the wall, he started to open the envelope Professor Champion had kept hidden here.

"No need to do that."

He glanced up, the flash dropping from his mouth.

The Jefferson Gallery's overhead lights blossomed on.

Dr. Denis Gilford, president of Brimstone College, stood on the threshold. His .32-caliber revolver was pointing straight at Scrib.

"This envelope," Scrib inquired, "is chock full of stuff about you, huh?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

"Serious enough to kill about?"

"Yes, and serious enough for me to pay Champion $43,000 about over the past year and a half," Gilford answered. "Champion somehow got the notion I was a fraud. Which I am. He very cautiously gathered material proving all my credentials are false."

"Why didn't you just take off?"

"I could've moved on, I suppose—assumed yet another identity. Fooling people has been my life's work and I'm quite good at it," said the college president. "However, I'm getting along in years and had decided to end my days here. There's a very liberal retirement and pension setup."

"That's not likely to happen now, though. I'd say your academic career has gone flooey."

"Not at all, young man. Once I have all the documents poor Champion so patiently gathered, I'll be safe. For a while, if not forever."

"You can't—"

"Bribe you? Certainly not. I put you down as an honest fellow the moment I saw you," said Gilford, smiling. "And from what I heard at the professor's house tonight, after you interrupted my search

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and caused me to lurk in the shrubbery, I am certain." He gestured with his gun. "No, you I'll have to shoot."

"Is that one of your perks here? You get to shoot somebody now and then?"

"I can certainly shoot a vandal who broke into the Jefferson Gallery and attempted to steal a valuable though ugly painting," he replied. "No doubt, in desperate need of money for something or other, you hatched this scheme to—"

"I'm not the only one who knows about this."

"You're alluding to the skinny Miss Warbeck? She doesn't know much," the grinning Gilford told him. "I've been trailing you since you left Champion's digs. You didn't even tell her you were coming here."

"She knows enough to—"

"No, that won't wash, Merlin." Gilford stepped into the big white room. "Two quick shots ought to—"

"Let's not do that, Dr. Gilford, sir."

Sighing, Scrib got to his feet. "Evening, Detective Ferro."

The policeman was a small curly-haired man of forty-one. His gun was a .38. "I didn't quite believe the lady at first, Merlin," he said, coming into the room. "But she's very persistent and she convinced me you'd solved the murder and had gone off to do something about it on your own. I thought I'd best drop over here."

"She followed me here, too, huh?"

"Right, then called me on the phone."

"Yeah, I think I know why." Scrib handed him the envelope as he moved to the doorway.

"To save your bacon obviously," said Ferro.

Shrugging, Scrib left the gallery and stepped into the hallway. He nearly bumped into Salty. "Thanks," he said.

"I heard most of the end of it from out here," she told him.

He started down the stairs. "I guess I should've confided in you."

Catching up with him as he descended, she asked, "How do you feel?"

"Alive."

"No, I mean, didn't you really sneak over here to find that blackmail stuff and then use it yourself? Then you'd have enough money to drive your own Mercedes, wear Italian shoes, dress—"

"If I had money I'd start my own agency, you know that," he said from the bottom of the stairs. "But in this case I wasn't after any

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money. I just wanted to see justice done. I liked Professor Champion. Back when I knew him, he wouldn't have blackmailed anyone."

"You know, I didn't know the president was trailing you. I mean, I did notice him walking across the campus in the same direction as you, but I assumed college presidents did things like that, even at three in the morning. I suppose if I had a college of my own," she said as they left the building, "I'd take walks through it at all hours. I really phoned Detective Ferro to make sure you turned over anything you found."

"Yeah, I deduced that." The cold of the morning hit him and he shivered.

"Then you really are satisfied with the way things worked out?"

"Yep."

"How come you're not smiling?"

"I am."

"Not much of a smile."

"I'm doing the best I can," he said.

She hesitated for a moment, then took his hand.

"Q"

## DETECTIVERSE

### *THE IMPERFECT WIFE*

*by NOLEN HARSH*

I didn't like the way she talked,
And couldn't stand the way she walked.
I ridiculed the way she looked.
What killed me was the way she cooked.

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**a distinguished reprint by**

**DOROTHY SALISBURY DAVIS**

*Jan did not like Eddie Dorfman. Or did she? Maybe that was the trouble. Baby-blue eyes and black hair with a streak of grey, a whispery lower lip. The women kept asking who he was. It wasn't hard to guess the speculation. Maiden's End was by no means famous for marital stability.*

Publishers Weekly *said of Dorothy Salisbury Davis's latest novel,* Lullaby of Murder*: "Like its predecessors, Davis's refreshingly nonviolent, cerebral suspense story is a must for discriminating fans." Ditto "The Last Party" . . .*

# THE LAST PARTY

## *by DOROTHY SALISBURY DAVIS*

The Winthrops had a tremendous collection of Big Band records—Miller, Lombardo, Harry James . . . But then, the Winthrops had a tremendous collection of almost everything, and when they gave a party Tom Winthrop's measure of its success was the variety of his possessions to which his guests found their way. His hospitality was excessive: champagne, the best of liquors; the dining-room buffet—replenished throughout the evening, with monster prawns, half lobsters, mounds of succulent beef, crisp vegetables, mousses, and soufflés, melons, cheeses, and the most delicate of pastries.

The trouble with the Winthrops' parties was that nothing ever happened at them; paradoxically, too much was going on. There was a billiard room in the basement for those not drawn to the dance. Next to the billiard room was the gun room, with its trophies of ancestral hunts. Tom liked to tell that it was part of Sally's inher-

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itance. Her great-grandfather was supposed to have gone big-game hunting with Teddy Roosevelt. The younger residents of Maiden's End had a modest reverence for *that* Roosevelt, but their politics, for the most part, were in the tradition of his cousin Franklin. Nor did they have much taste for guns or the hunt. It was generally by accident that a guest found himself—or herself—in the gun room. Or he might pass through it on his way to a room Winthrop called "The Double Entendre," where he housed his collection of pornographic art.

It remains to be said of Winthrop—or perhaps of Maiden's End—that since he had built Woodside, a neo-Tudor mansion that dwarfed the sedate, more modest houses, some of which were historically significant, no one in the community had ever asked him if he was related to other Winthrops of their acquaintance.

On the afternoon of what became known as the last Winthrop party, Jan Swift stopped by the Adams house to see what Nancy was going to wear. Jan, a plump, self-conscious woman, didn't like parties, but she went to them. She'd have liked it less not to be asked, and if you didn't go to one you might not be asked to the next. Or so Jan feared. What it amounted to was that when the invitation came she was so relieved to have been asked—for Fred's sake mostly, she told herself—that there was never any doubt of their accepting.

"Hello?" she called up the stairs. The Adamses still left their door unlocked in the daytime. "Nancy, it's me."

"Hello, you," Nancy called down, a greeting that always gave Jan pleasure, something about the intimacy of it. Jan had never heard her say it to anyone else. "Come up if you like. Or I'll be down in a minute. I'm doing a bed in the guest room."

Jan climbed the stairs, a little aware of her weight, and wondered what she could wear and be comfortable to dance in that wouldn't look like a tent. She loved to dance when she got high enough and someone besides Fred asked her. Fred danced much as he did most things, determined to succeed. She stood at the guest-room door and watched Nancy turn down one of the twin beds.

"A comforter should do him," Nancy said. It was going to be one of those warm summer nights when people would want to go swimming after the party. Or sailing on the river.

Jan thought about the word "comforter," the coziness of it. "Who's coming?"

"Eddie Dorfman. He was Dick's roommate in college. He shows

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up now and then on his way somewhere—generally broke, but with great expectations. Is it hot in here? I was going to put him in Ellen's room, but I don't like to do that." Ellen was the oldest of the Adamses' three daughters.

"It'll cool off by bedtime," Jan said. She was thinking how nice it was for Nancy, the girls of an age to take care of themselves. Her own two had to be picked up at the Swim Club any time now. Nancy was ten years older than Jan, well up in her forties, but with a finely boned face and dark, deep-set eyes that made her look more striking the older she got. She played tennis and swam and wrote poetry that Jan did her best to understand. Jan nodded at the open bed. "Is he a bachelor?"

"To all intents and purposes. He's a charming rogue, if you want to know."

"I don't particularly. What are you going to wear tonight?"

"Oh, God. Something I won't have to hang up afterward." She gave a last look around the room. Following her eyes, Jan noticed the published volume of Nancy's poems on the bedside table. Nancy gave Jan a nudge into the hall ahead of her. "Eddie tried to seduce me the night Dick and I announced our engagement. Whenever I see him, he pretends regrets at not having succeeded." She hooked her arm through Jan's. "Don't hold it against him, you puritan. He thinks he's being *très galant*."

Eddie was still at it, Jan judged, by the way he danced with Nancy, cheek to cheek, abdomen to abdomen. Furthermore, Nancy was enjoying it . . . "Moonlight Serenade," "Elmer's Tune," "That Old Black Magic" . . . They drew away from one another, took a long look into each other's eyes, laughed, and sailed away to the far end of the deck.

It was pretty much the older crowd that turned on to the music of the Big Bands, and you couldn't say the deck was jammed. The noise would start at midnight with the arrival of a rock group. Jan thought of another drink, which she didn't need but wanted. She didn't even want it. What in hell did she want? Fred and Dick were probably shooting pool in the basement. Billiards: a fine distinction. She did not like Eddie Dorfman. Or did she? Maybe that was the trouble. Baby-blue eyes and black hair with a streak of grey, a whispery lower lip. The women kept asking Jan who he was, as though she was Nancy's keeper.

It wasn't hard to guess the speculation. Maiden's End (named

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after a family called Maiden) was by no means famous for marital stability. Jan thought of the switched couples at the party—the Eckstroms and the Bellows. What a mix-up for the kids. And there were at least three grass widows, as her mother called them. She'd have been willing to bet that Liz Toomey would make a play for Eddie Dorfman before the night was over. She emptied her glass and thought of shifting to champagne rather than having to go back to the bar again alone.

Tom Winthrop came up and took the glass from her hand and dropped it over the deck. "Come on, Jan. They're playing our song."

Our song indeed. Neither in nor out of step, he took her with him on a cruise of his guests, wanting to know if everyone was happy and assuming she was, just to be in on the trip. Not a word did he say to her, or she to him, for that matter. When they came alongside Nancy and Dorfman, Jan broke away from Tom and said, "May we cut in?" You could almost say she plucked Eddie out of Nancy's arms.

"What fun!" Dorfman cried, though he cast Nancy a wistful glance. After that he gave Jan his complete attention. He even hummed "Sentimental Journey" in her ear. She had never felt lighter on her feet. He was a good dancer.

"I wonder," she said breathlessly between tunes, "if they have 'Flatfoot Floogie with the Floy Floy.' "

"If they do, I hope it's not contagious."

She laughed too loudly and explained, "My mother used to play all her old records for me on a rainy day and we'd dance up in the attic."

"What fun," he said again. "No wonder you dance so well."

"I do with the right partner." She tossed her head and sang, a bit off tune, but urgently, " 'He danced divinely and I loved him so, but there I go . . .' That was another of my mother's favorites."

The music started again, another set of records. "Glenn Miller," Jan said, "oh, boy."

" 'I saw those harbor lights,' " he crooned, and held her close. He said after a few bars, "I'll be in London this time tomorrow."

"Will you? I wish I were."

He drew back and looked at her.

"I mean just that I love to travel."

He held her close again. "Perhaps we'll meet in some exotic port someday," he said. His cheek, soft, freshly shaven, was scented with lavender. A tango then. They dipped and glided, a backward dip for

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Jan, something she had never risked before in her life, and then a waltz that dissolved into a seductive whine.

"Salomé," her partner said.

"I forgot my veils," Jan said; she tried to repress the impulse to lead.

"Let's pretend." He disengaged himself and with provocative little gestures coaxed her into letting go. Jan shed veil after imaginary veil, clownish at first, but with a growing feeling that she was actually graceful. Eddie posed as a macho Herod; he demanded more and more letting go. For a few seconds Jan danced with utter abandon, every pound of her aquiver.

"Help!" she cried finally, and collapsed in self-conscious laughter, sinking to the floor.

Eddie mimed the removal of his own head and brought it to her in cupped hands, which rather thoroughly distorted the story line, to say nothing of desanctifying John the Baptist.

Everyone, having given Jan space, now applauded, laughed, and slipped away into the next dance.

She blushed and got to her feet. "I need a drink," she said.

"I'll get it for you."

"I'll go with you," she said and caught his hand. Then: "I'll meet you at the bar. I've got to make some repairs first."

Nancy was waiting for her when she came out of the bathroom, a look of pure disgust on her face.

"Hey," Jan said. "What's the matter?"

"It wasn't funny, kiddo."

"I thought it was fun."

"It was pretty undignified, if you want the truth."

If it was the truth, it was the last thing she wanted. "That wasn't exactly a minuet the two of you were dancing when I pulled you apart," she said. "You wouldn't be jealous, would you?"

"Jan, I care about you and I don't like to see you make a fool of yourself."

"Okay. I get the message." The worst of it was that deep down it hadn't been fun; the make-believe that she had almost bought herself now fell apart.

"Don't sulk over it. For heaven's sake, you're not a little girl any more."

"I never was a *little* girl."

"Just don't drink so much."

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"It's none of your damned business how much I drink. Okay, keep your Don Juan. I'm going to find Fred."

She did not look for Fred right away. She went out to the garden to cool off, to sort out anger from hurt, as though they were divisible at the moment. She took a glass of champagne with her, drank it too fast, and then took another from the tray one of the teenaged helpers was passing as though his night's wage depended on the score in champagne corks. The feeling of humiliation began to set in, a replay of the exhibition she had made of herself. She didn't know whom she disliked most, Nancy, Dorfman, or herself. Herself.

She almost went directly home then, but Fred was always accusing her of disappearing at parties. She spent a lot of time in bathrooms, especially if there was a children's bathroom, where the ducks and frogs and floating pigs gave her surcease from the social tensions. Fred was not in the billiard room. No one was. She wandered through the gun room, and wondered vaguely if any of the blunderbusses in the glass cases were loaded. She looked up at the moosehead over the fireplace, its glassy eyes frozen in sadness. "You and me, baby."

THE DOUBLE ENTENDRE: the sign hung above the door. That's me, she thought. I'm a double entendre. She wandered with fascinated distaste from one to another of Tom Winthrop's pornographic objets d'art. He always set out a half dozen or so for the titillation of his guests. For anyone who appreciated the sampling enough to tell him so, he would come down and show the really important things in the collection. Fred said he'd never seen anything like it. Fred, the connoisseur. It was a strange place to be alone, a strange place to be discovered if anyone came. That was all she needed. She remembered her mother opening the closet door on her, a precocious ten-year-old with a flashlight looking at the illustrations in an anatomy book she had stolen from the locked bookcase. "Wicked girl!" There were no locked bookcases in Fred's and her house. No anatomy books, either.

She picked up a picture—in what medium she could not tell—of a unicorn. No larger than three by four inches, in a silver frame, it was exquisite, and she could not imagine what was pornographic about it. Then, when she went to set it down, she saw the trick: a shutter effect where beauty in a different angle of light turned into obscenity. She set it down and turned to flee the room. Dorfman was standing in the doorway.

"Here you are—in the naughty room. What fun!"

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She stopped herself from saying that she was looking for her husband. She pushed by him. "Please tell Nancy—if Fred's looking for me, I've gone home."

"Don't leave on my account."

"I'm not," she said.

She found Fred herself. He was in the library, where he and Dick and Phil Eckstrom were deep in conversation. Local politics, she gathered. Eckstrom was on the town board. She did not interrupt. The bar wasn't crowded, and she decided on one for the road. The bartender, who worked most parties at Maiden's End, didn't even ask her what she wanted. He knew: Scotch with a splash. Nancy, she observed, was dancing again. With Phil Eckstrom, senior.

Jan finished her drink and went out by way of the garden. From there she cut down along the ravine path that crossed the creek and meandered up near the Adams house, beyond which lay her own. There was a three-quarter moon, but she knew the path from her own childhood.

What did Nancy see in him, she wondered. Something. Or she would not have left her poems at his bedside. He certainly wasn't going to understand them if Jan didn't. She often wondered if Dick did—all that symbolism. Not that Nancy cared: It isn't what they say, it's what they show. Simply fireworks? Jan had to believe they were deeper than that. She often imagined Nancy making them up, quite removed, while Dick was telling one of the stories in which he was the hero. It wasn't easy to be a hero in advertising, not and continue to make as much money as Dick did. Pure fantasy. To which all Nancy had to say, in effect, was, "Yes, dear." She'd been flying in a holding pattern for years. But then, who hadn't? After the first child, Jan didn't say, "Yes, dear," to Fred. In Fred's stories he was always the victim; most people found that funny. The trouble was, Fred's stories were true.

Nancy ought not to have spoken to her the way she had. She ought to have understood. Maybe she did. And that was worse, even more humiliating. The hall lights were on in the Adams house, upstairs and down. An unfamiliar car, which had to be Eddie's, sat alongside Nancy's battered VW in the driveway. They had taken Dick's Buick. Jan always felt that hall lights made a house look more empty than, say, a light in the living room or an upstairs bedroom. She went round to the kitchen window and got the key from the bird feeder. She returned it after opening the door. There was something she had to know—if there was anything to know: She wanted to see how

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Nancy had inscribed the book for Eddie Dorfman. In Jan's copy she had written, "Love, toujours."

The stairs creaked beneath her step. It was an old house with a curving banister that many a child's behind had polished over the years. She didn't hesitate in turning on the bedside lamp. Somehow it seemed her right to be there. She saw at once that the book had been removed. Dorfman's one large piece of luggage was on the stand, the flap closed but not entirely zipped. So far as she could see, he had not unpacked at all: no hairbrushes or shaving kit, nothing on the dresser. She looked into the bathroom. Not even a toothbrush. And he had been freshly shaved. He reeked of after-shave cologne. The bathroom was still scented with it. It was as though, after dressing, he had repacked.

She went to the suitcase and ran the zipper far enough to lift the flap. Tucked into the corner was *Refraction*, the poems of Nancy Eldridge Adams. There was no inscription. Which brought the shame thundering in her ears. It was more difficult to fit the book back than it had been to take it out and in doing so she disturbed the bathrobe and partially uncovered something in chamois.

Now, Jan had given Nancy a chamois bag of several compartments two Christmases before. Nancy used it, when traveling, to carry such of her jewelry as she took along. She had several nice antique pieces and a valuable pearl necklace. Ordinarily, they were kept in an ivory jewel box on Nancy's dressing table. Jan lost no time in discovering that the bag was the same and contained the pearls, a diamond brooch and earrings, and the lovely jade pendant, the only piece of jewelry Jan had ever coveted. Nancy had promised to give it to her someday.

The thought that Dorfman was a thief delighted her after the shock of discovery wore off. The question, however, was what to do about it without placing herself in even deeper disgrace. Her mind grew muddled with the sickening thought of how to explain the discovery; she also wondered then just when the theft had occurred. She had not met him until the party was well on. He could have stayed at the house on some pretext and come along later on his own. But surely he had to expect that Nancy would discover the theft when they came home? Jan understood then why the suitcase was packed: He expected to leave tonight, long before the Winthrop party was over. A rented car, London tomorrow . . .

However humiliating it might be, Jan resolved to bare the truth

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to Nancy. Replacing everything, she drew the zipper. And changed her resolution even as she put out the light. What was a handful of jewels in comparison to her own pride? She would let the matter run its course and never let on she anticipated the story when Nancy told her of the theft. It didn't occur to Jan to wonder why Eddie Dorfman had not put the suitcase in the car before he left for the party. Her main concern was to get out of the house quickly.

But Dorfman was coming up the stairs when she reached the hallway. He quickened his step when he saw her and came round the banister, smiling with that nasty lower lip. "I had a feeling we'd meet again before I took off," he said. "Something told me."

Jan gave a little moan of chagrin. She thought of accusing him outright. She had no subtlety, and she was able to defend herself only by striking out in anger. But at the moment she had no anger. Nor could she run: Dorfman stood between her and the stairs, one hand on the railing, the other on the wall.

"Let me guess: You've brought me something. A flower? Something that blooms in the night? Come on, let's have a look." He nodded toward the door. "You're not afraid of me, are you? I'm completely harmless unless stepped on."

Jan made a noise in her throat. No words came.

"I thought that would amuse you," he said. "Light the light and let's see where we are."

Jan turned back into the room and lit the lamp. She would run when the chance came. Simply run.

He leaned in the doorway, seeming to fill it, and looked all around the room before letting his eyes rest on her. "Nothing? Did you put something in my suitcase?"

Jan shook her head.

"I know: Nancy told you I was leaving and you wanted a few minutes alone with me first. If only I had more time . . ."

"You're making fun of me," she said.

"I don't make fun of women, Salomé," he said. He came in and closed the door. He drew the bolt across. There was no key.

"Don't! Leave the door open," Jan said.

He turned, smiling. "Then you shouldn't flirt with a man of my reputation. Didn't Nancy tell you?"

"Just let me go," she pleaded.

"Go." He stepped aside.

But as she tried to pass him, he caught her, pulled her around and kissed her, forcing her back to the closed door.

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Jan yielded, as though that might gain her time, or some position of advantage, but with the thrust of his tongue between her lips, its probe of her clenched teeth, she broke away.

A few feet apart, they stood and stared at each other. He took his cigarette case from his pocket, opened it, and closed it again. He put it away without taking a cigarette. "Do you mind telling me what you were doing in my room?"

"I was looking for a book."

He began to laugh, as though at the ridiculousness of the excuse. He stopped. "Nancy's book? Why? Am I not allowed to have it?" Slowly, his whole expression changed; he understood. "Salomé, you're jealous! You weren't flirting with *me*. It was an act. And me thinking all the time I was the object of your affections . . . Eddie, my boy, you're slipping. You should have caught that—no vibes, no sparks . . ."

Jan went to the door with as good grace as she could manage. Her main feeling was relief, and, at the heart's core, something almost pleasurable. At the sound of the suitcase zipper she glanced back.

"Look here, Salomé. I'm left-handed. You've put the book back in the wrong corner." He plunged his hand into the case and brought out the chamois bag. "Ha! I've found the surprise." He weighed the bag in his hand, opened a compartment, and closed it again after a quick, pretended glimpse at what was in it. "Nancy's jewelry? Surely not." Slowly then, in mock wonderment: "By God, I'd never have believed such mischief in a grown woman. You *are* a Salomé. You wanted my head."

Jan felt faint. Her whole body was perspiring. She pulled at the bolt and skinned her knuckles when it gave.

"Wait," he said as she stepped out of the room. "Listen to me for a minute."

Jan paused.

"Why don't you put these back—wherever they came from—and neither of us needs ever to say a word." He brought her the bag.

Jan took it from him and went into the master bedroom, where she put the jewelry, piece by piece, back in the ivory box on Nancy's dressing table. She tucked the chamois bag into the side drawer where Nancy kept it.

He was waiting at the stairs, smiling. He offered her his left hand, as to a child, the suitcase in his right. "No hard feelings. Come on now, give me your hand and no hard feelings."

Jan gave it to him as though it were a bribe.

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"I'll bet Nancy doesn't even know," he said. "What fun."

A bribe for what?

With a crack-of-the-whip wrench, she whirled him from his feet. He let go of her hand, trying to save himself, but while she fell backward, he hurtled down the stairs, the suitcase clattering after him. She listened for a few seconds and then picked herself up. All she could hear was the pounding of her own heart. The suitcase was lodged between his sprawled legs at the turn of the stairs, the rest of him out of sight from where she stood.

Jan went down carefully. When she stooped and looked into his face, Dorfman's lashes fluttered like a wounded butterfly, but the baby-blue eyes only stared. His cigarette case had flown out of his pocket, and a lighter. Jan was stepping round them when she blacked out.

Her first awareness was of rock music, the shattering beat of it breaking through what had seemed a silvery stillness. She was walking across the bridge on the ravine path, the moonlight more vivid than seemed natural. Her mind was crystal clear except that she could not understand why she was going in that direction when she had intended to go home. Then everything came back up to the moment of blackout. She sat down on the bridge and said what she knew to be a futile prayer, that it was all a dream.

She got up after a few minutes and returned to the party, going in the way she had come out, through the French doors onto the garden. Fred was standing just indoors, his pipe in hand, watching the disco dancing.

"No," Fred said when she approached.

"No, what?"

"I won't dance."

"Who asked you?" He had not even missed her.

Nancy and Dick were dancing together, very athletic, the best-looking couple among a lot of very chic and handsome people. The Big Band crowd had all gone home.

"Come on," Fred said. "You're pouting. Let's get into the action." He knocked out his pipe and put it in his pocket.

"I don't think so," Jan said after a tremendous effort inside herself. "Why don't you ask Liz Toomey?"

"Why do you always try to make me dance with somebody else?"

"I don't always," Jan said.

"I don't suppose you want to go home yet?"

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"Soon," she said.

It was after three when Dick and Nancy Adams drove home. They were surprised to see Dorfman's rented car still in the driveway. He had told them at the party he'd been able to get on a delayed flight taking off from Kennedy at two.

By the time the police came, Dick was fairly sure of what had happened, that Eddie had banged his suitcase into the railing and then lost his balance when it caromed into his legs at the top of the stairs. He didn't touch anything, of course. When the police arrived, he went into the study with Nancy.

"Poor, poor man," Nancy kept saying. "Poor restless man. Why couldn't he have waited until morning the way he'd planned?"

Dick sat with his head in his hands.

The police officer in charge came in presently and closed the door behind him. He asked more questions than seemed necessary to Nancy. He did not seem satisfied that Dorfman had left the party alone. She assured him that she had walked to the end of the Winthrop driveway with him.

He turned to Dick and asked him if he could identify the little silver-framed picture which, to all appearances, like the cigarette case and the lighter, had been jarred out of Dorfman's pocket in the fall.

"Yes, I can," Dick said heavily. "It's trick pornography and it belongs to Tom Winthrop."

"Are you saying the deceased stole it, Mr. Adams?"

"I'm not, but I think it's possible."

"Is it valuable? Was it valuable?" the police officer corrected himself.

"Yes."

"And did you notice it when you discovered the body?"

"Yes, sir, I noticed it."

"It looks like somebody ground a heel into it, doesn't it?"

"I only noticed that it was smashed," Dick said.

"A woman's heel, I'd say, but we can't be sure until we get some measurements and pictures." He turned back to Nancy. "I'd like to have the shoes you're wearing, Mrs. Adams, if you don't mind."

"Mine?" Nancy said.

"Well, ma'am, we've got to start somewhere."

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*a NEW short story by*

**WILLIAM BANKIER**

*Shawms, sackbuts, and recorders droned and buzzed through a repetitive melody that was fiercely beautiful. Tony Pringle imagined people just like himself listening to this pagan music in cold stone rooms, drunk on the conviction that they had reached the limits of human potential . . .*

# CUTTING IT CLOSE

***by WILLIAM BANKIER***

Roy Clancy just disappeared, without a word to me. It used to be Roy's Barbershop, but now, according to the sign outside on the pavement, it was Guido's.

Somebody had imposed a modernization on the interior during the two months since my previous visit. Instead of three chairs, there were six, each with its sink in cocoa porcelain. I could sense that Guido and his henchmen were hair stylists, not barbers, and I wanted out of there. But I had to find out about Roy, because in my pocket was the Vivaldi cassette he had loaned me last time around.

The coward's way meant submitting to a listless shampoo that left my scalp flakier than when I sat down. I was given a cream rinse and a blow-dry, then butterfly touches with comb and scissors that made me want to scream, "Cut, man! Cut my hair!" At the end came payment of a sum equivalent to a week's rent on the cold-water room I inhabit since my art studio folded and I've moved down from Chelsea to a cheaper neighborhood in Southwest 19.

The radio at Guido's is tuned to the pop music station. They don't play Vivaldi or any other of the classical sounds that were Roy Clancy's trademark and his joy. Three years ago I was new in Wimbledon and smarting from the humiliation of having accepted a

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freelance job sketching living-room suites for a discount store. I had decided to raise my morale with a haircut and, spotting Roy's sign, I pushed open the door and walked into an atmosphere resembling the Royal Albert Hall.

There was only one customer that day, an elderly gent tented under the striped sheet. Roy was bending to his cutting, elbows out and hands moving fluently like von Karajan on the podium. And it *was* the Berlin Philharmonic (I recognized the verve), thundering their way through the final movement of Beethoven's Seventh. It wasn't a commercial recording—it must have been taped from a live broadcast. At the conclusion, an audience loud with students gave voice to a savage roar of approval.

Roy and I got on comfortably from the start. Picture a tall heavy man with frizzy black hair, tufted eyebrows, and cavernous nostrils which he aims at you as he tips his head back to get a proper look through the wire-framed glasses he wears. Appropriately, the barber's apertures are all hirsute. It's as if Roy Clancy were a bale of hair, the fabric wearing out in places to let the contents poke through.

He won me in the first few minutes by the way he attacked my head. Several months' accumulation of premature grey went tumbling to the linoleum, where it drifted as evidence of my improving appearance. The man knew what I wanted and got my silhouette back where it ought to be in ten minutes. But it was his choice of music that took me over. When the Beethoven finished, he popped in another cassette—Pavarotti overflowing with arias as if the glorious tunes were boiling inside him over a hot fire. I said:

"How nice to hear these great tapes."

"You like? I watch the listings and when there's anything good on Radio Three, I switch on. Otherwise, I use my tapes."

Thus began our low-key relationship based on a mutual love of classical music and my need to have my ears lowered every couple of months. Being an insular fellow, I never took it any further. Had I been good at developing friendships, I would have cultivated a few agency art directors and my studio in Chelsea might have made money. But, like Popeye, I yam what I yam and that's all that I yam. Wealth does not await me in this world, nor does fame. Not even a wife and kids, unless some aggressive woman with an eye for a father figure ropes me and drags me off to the registry office. Never happen.

The closest Roy and I ever came to intimacy was when he loaned

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me his Vivaldi cassette on my previous visit—before he vanished to be replaced by the flamboyant Guido. I had expressed interest in this music that sounded to me as if it was being played in a tiny room by musicians half the normal size. Roy explained that the instruments being used were hundreds of years old—not our fiddles, brass, and woodwinds of today.

"Take it home with you," he said, pressing the eject button so that the cassette popped up out of the tape deck like a slice of toast. "Bring it back next time you come in."

Now here I was. But where was Roy? Why the sudden disappearance? I sat in the chair with a hot towel piled on my head while Guido waited for the meter to clock more money. I concentrated on reading an ancient copy of the *Observer* supplement, the shop's library being a holdover from Roy Clancy's time. Idly, I turned the pages, browsing stories of last year's election, a financial crisis long over, cinema ballyhoo for a film that failed. It was all much more fascinating than the news of the day.

"Where's Roy?" I asked when the ritual was finished and I was at the counter paying the inflated tariff, anxious to get home so I could wash out the lacquer and the flaky residue of the cheap shampoo.

"Oh, he go. He sell the place."

"He never said anything to me."

"Ah, he getting old. This job, you gotta have the legs." He slapped his tightly packed jeans.

"I'd like to get in touch with him. Did he leave an address?" I knew only that Roy's wife kept house in Brighton where the barber went on weekends. During the week he stayed somewhere in SW19. I had the impression it was a place in Wimbledon village.

"He leave a phone number." Guido scribbled the numerals on a card. I took it and went outside and walked to the telephone booth on the corner, avoiding my reflection in shop windows. As I dialed the number, I realized that in losing Roy, I had only myself to blame. Perhaps he was partly at fault for not advising me last time of his intention to give up the business. But what if he *had* warned me? Would I have taken him to dinner? Would I have invited him around to my dismal digs for wine and Mozart?

A woman answered the telephone with a Scottish accent.

"May I speak to Roy Clancy, please?"

"Who wants him?"

"I do, in fact." I was not having any of her northern village sus-

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picion. "I have something that belongs to him and I want to return it."

"Then you'd better bring it here." She gave me an address in the village. I said goodbye and caught a 93 bus up the hill, stepping down on the Parkside.

The house was one of a row of elegant dwellings, each the size of a small hotel. Across the road, Wimbledon Common stretched for miles, ragged green and brown, all the way to Putney. I walked along a twisting gravel path between plane trees and azaleas, climbed mossy brick steps, and rang a bell that sounded rooms away. I stood waiting while the summer morning hummed and rustled behind me. How did old Roy come to be living here?

The woman who opened the door was in her late fifties. She was dressed in loose trousers and a terracotta fisherman's blouse with deep pockets in the front. "Och, you're the one," she said, still resenting my telephone call. Her grey hair lay short and smooth as a pelt. She had the ruddy, meaty face of a school games-mistress. "You can leave whatever it is with me."

I took the cassette from my pocket but found myself reluctant to give it to her. "It's important Roy gets this," I said.

"I'm not liable to steal his property. More likely the other way round."

A second woman appeared. I sensed this was the lady of the house, the Scottish person being some sort of housekeeper or companion. "What is it, Maggie?"

"He says he has something that belongs to Roy."

"Then let him come in." Maggie backed off and the newcomer opened the door wide as I entered.

"I'm worried to death about Roy," she said. She was delicate as compared to Maggie, who was six feet tall with heavy limbs. "I'm Lucy Hillier-Menzies. Roy has been missing now for three days."

"He's gone home," Maggie grumbled.

I followed the women down a corridor into a high-ceilinged room furnished with deep, upholstered chairs. There were books and framed photographs, shelves of tapes and records, and a stereo rig. Tall doors drawn open led onto a stone pathway that wandered into a well tended garden. Lucy said, "Bring us some tea, Maggie, please. Unless you'd prefer something stronger, Mr.—?"

"Tony Pringle. Tea would be fine, thank you." From my armchair, I leaned forward and handed over the cassette. "Roy loaned this to

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me the last time I was in his shop. That was two months ago. When I went to return it today, I discovered he's sold the place."

"He's been thinking of retiring to Brighton for some time. He and his wife have a house by the sea."

"I knew that."

"I've been dreading his going away. Roy and I have such a rapport over music. That's how we met." As she spoke, I absorbed the sweetness of her. If Maggie was a games-mistress, Lucy Hillier-Menzies was a schoolgirl never changed. Her features were smooth as a soap figurine. She had pale, honest eyes.

She described an outdoor concert by the Wimbledon Symphony in Cannizaro Park three summers back she and Maggie had attended. The man in the next deck chair turned out to be Roy Clancy. His understanding of the music impressed her, as did his irreverence. During intermission, as they chatted over a glass of wine from Lucy's hamper, he referred to Herbert von Karajan as "Carry-on von Herbert." This made her laugh and Roy responded by becoming more friendly and entertaining.

"On a visit to the house some days later, when he told me about his commuting to and from Brighton and his rented room down the hill, I suggested he move in here."

The Scottish woman came in with a tray of tea, neatly cut sandwiches, and slices of cake. She carried cups and plates around the room, never quite straightening her back, as if she were in a stone cottage with a low roof. "Dear Maggie Murchison," Lucy said of her. "How many times has this good woman saved my life?"

"I'm not in the business of saving lives," Maggie grumbled, but the testimony of affection obviously pleased her. She lowered her rangy frame onto a hassock and bent to her plate.

"You came to my rescue when Darryl was killed." Lucy lifted from the table beside her a photograph in a silver frame. She passed it to me and I studied a younger Lucy in a veiled hat clinging to the arm of a handsome boy in Royal Air Force tunic. "We had seven weeks together in the summer of 1941," she said. "It was quite marvelous, really. There was no time for an angry word, nor any disappointment. He flew a Spitfire." She smiled at her companion. "Maggie moved in to help me, and since then we've hardly ever been apart."

I was more concerned about my absent barber than about her pilot, apparently killed in action forty years ago. As we got on with

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our tea, I said, "Is it customary for Roy to disappear like this without telling anybody?"

"Not in my experience. At our little party three nights ago, he seemed on top of the world. The business of selling the shop had been weighing upon him. But that was all finished now, he had his money, he was a free man."

Maggie grunted. "I think the Italians did something."

"Sorry?"

"Those people who bought the shop—they didn't want to pay his price. There was ill feeling."

"There usually is when a property is bought and sold," Lucy said. "I don't believe it means they did anything drastic."

"Well," Maggie said, "he took his suitcase the next morning and he left here. And he never made it to Brighton."

I had to catch up. "There was a party?"

"Only the three of us acting silly," Lucy said. "We drank quite a bit and Roy did his conducting. I was past my limit, I had to go to bed. I said goodbye to Roy in case I missed him in the morning—he was going home to try and persuade his wife."

I blinked my lack of comprehension. Lucy explained.

"Roy and I have become such friends—and his wife is very nice, we've met more than once—it occurred to me that his retirement need not mean goodbye. Instead of living in Brighton, why not move in here? There's plenty of room—Roy and Clara could have a suite of their own. All of London would be outside their door. And we could have such fun, the four of us, me and Maggie and Roy and Clara."

"Did Roy approve?"

"He loved the idea. He estimated that by selling the house in Brighton and putting that money with the proceeds from the sale of his shop, they'd have a jolly good holiday fund. Winters on Greek islands."

"And now he's disappeared."

"I arose at eleven on the morning after the party. Roy was gone, so I assumed he'd already left for the south coast."

"I saw him leave," Maggie confirmed. "He came downstairs at eight when I was cleaning up. I gave him coffee and away he went."

I said to Lucy, "You mentioned something about Roy persuading his wife."

"It's understandable." She touched her schoolgirl hair. "The relationship between Roy and myself is not so appealing to his wife.

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Clara and I respect each other—she knows there's nothing between me and her husband except friendship based on a mutual love of music—but now that he's retired I think she'd prefer him to settle in Brighton and say goodbye to me and London. The idea to sell up there and move in here was going to take some selling."

I considered the situation—a woman in Brighton told that she must leave her home to stay in the grander house of a wealthier woman who happens to have a strong common bond with her husband. Could such a wife cause that husband to disappear? "You must have checked with Mrs. Clancy," I said, "to find out if Roy got home."

"She called here," Lucy said. "Roy was due yesterday and she rang me to ask if he'd changed his plans. Clara is waiting another day before she goes to the police."

I ate a second sandwich and finished my tea. Then I said, "Let me have the cassette back, please." Lucy handed it to me. "It's Roy's property, I have a good excuse for dropping in at his home in Brighton to return it." I got to my feet and checked my watch. "I can get a train at Clapham Junction and be down there before the end of the afternoon."

"But why?" Lucy asked. "You don't think that Clara—"

"I'm not sure. I'd like to get the feel of the situation."

I left the house and was approaching the front gate when Maggie Murchison overtook me. She was carrying a plastic sack of rubbish which she stacked by the entrance beside a couple of others. "We'll never see Roy Clancy again," she predicted.

"How can you be so sure?"

"Talk to those Italians."

I almost laughed. "I met Guido. He's a hairdresser—he isn't mafioso."

"Maybe they threatened him. All of his clothes are gone from his wardrobe. He doesn't intend to come back."

"Does Lucy know this?"

"I didn't want to worry her. You make the situation worse by coming here and stirring things up."

"Roy's disappeared. *That* is what's worrying her."

Maggie turned away. "I am going to run her bath." She strode toward the house—purposeful, protective. "She needs peace and quiet, not additional people."

The train got me to Brighton by half past four. I telephoned from the station to announce myself and confirm that Clara was at home.

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She sounded calm, her concern over Roy's absence under control. I took a cab to the house, which was in a neat terrace on a hillside road looking down across the promenade, the curving shingle, and the sea. I could imagine someone preferring to stay here rather than accepting a move up to London.

Clara Clancy let me in, took the cassette from me, exchanged it for a glass of the same gin she had been drinking. She struck me as being not a belter but a moderate and persistent consumer of alcohol.

"Roy was due here yesterday or the day before," she said. "According to Mrs. Hyphen, he left her place early in the morning after a late party. Roy *has* been known to act on impulse—like the time he took a week off and went to the Glyndebourne Festival. For all I know, he's queuing for tickets right now outside the San Francisco Opera."

"So you aren't worried about him."

"Should I be?" She was small and birdlike in colorful home-knits, her eyes registering nuances in my conversation that I was hardly aware of myself. I felt I could level with Clara Clancy.

"When a man disappears," I said, "foul play is always a possibility."

"Who would want to hurt Roy?"

"You," I said. "To mention one possibility."

"Ah. Clever, insidious man. You've figured out that I don't much like Lucy Hillier-Menzies and that I'd rather live out my retirement here than in her house. Well, you're quite right." She drained her drink and studied the empty glass as if a grain of truth were glistening in the dregs. "It never occurred to me, but of course—if I were to kill Roy in such a way as to escape detection, I'd have all that money from the sale of the shop, plus his insurance. I could forget about the rich bitch up in Wimbledon and stay here with my friends and my lovely English Channel."

"It's a theory," I said.

She laughed with such appreciation that I knew she had never touched a hair of her husband's head. "If he shows up, I may just have a go."

Aboard the train on my way back to London, I puzzled over what was going on. Roy Clancy had vanished, no question about that. Lucy Hillier-Menzies was genuinely worried about him, surely not involved. His wife, Clara, was calm and hiding nothing. Guido at

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the hair salon, formerly Roy's Barbershop, had shown me not a scintilla of sinister behavior. Not guilty, despite the accusations of Maggie Murchison.

What about Maggie herself? Inside me, I felt a vibration from my subconscious alarm. Earlier I had predicted that the woman scorned—Clara Clancy, forced to play second fiddle—had killed Roy to end the London duet. Was it possible I had nominated the wrong woman? Maggie had been with Lucy for years—housekeeper, companion, friend—her life linked in tandem with that of the wealthy widow.

In such a sweet existence, who needed the Barber of Southwest 19? Why should good old Roy be allowed to encroach, monopolizing Lucy's attention and affection? Bad enough to have him in part-time residence, going home to Brighton on the weekends. But now that he was talking about moving in permanently and bringing his wife . . .

I got off the train in Clapham, changed platforms, caught the next local to Wimbledon, then rode a taxi up the hill to the mansion on the Parkside. The plastic rubbish bags had been taken away from the gate—all except one. It had a scrap of paper taped to it with a handwritten message that made me smile. "Dustman—four bags are not too many for a house this size!" I have North American friends who marvel at the English garbage collector's power in deciding what he will take away and what he will leave behind.

Minutes later I was back in the comfortable sitting room, drinking brandy with Lucy and Maggie. "Roy's wife, Clara," I said. "She doesn't understand the disappearance any more than we do."

"Poor thing."

"Don't cry for her, she's taking it well. She never wanted to move up here anyway. I got the feeling she's relieved it won't be happening. But it doesn't mean she got rid of Roy, although I confess that was my suspicion when I went there."

"The Italians," Maggie whispered.

"With respect," I said, "that's a crazy idea."

"For weeks," she insisted, "Roy moaned about the price they were offering him. They kept trying to make him take less. The animosity was terrible."

Lucy agreed with me. "Isn't that normal practice?"

"With Italians, it becomes deadly," Maggie said. "They have blood

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feuds, vendettas, they never forget." Her Scottish accent rumbled ferociously.

"Yes, and remember Culloden," I said. "Come on, Maggie, I had my hair cut by Guido himself this morning."

Those Celtic eyes assessed the damage. "Don't let him near you again."

"Forget the Italians where Roy is concerned," I said, blushing.

Lucy was moving gracefully with the crystal decanter. I held out my glass as she said, "Then what is your theory, Mr. Pringle? Where is Roy?"

"Not in Brighton," I replied. "Nor is he buried behind the barbershop. The possibility remains that he may simply have decided to hit the road. People do it. They spend a lifetime working to rule and then suddenly they're over the hills and far away."

"A sort of amnesia?"

"Possibly." I waited for her comment. It came with assurance after a thoughtful pause.

"I don't believe it of Roy. What other possibilities are there?"

"It doesn't leave much." I glanced at Maggie, whose eyes broke the connection a split second too late to conceal a signal of guilt. I felt confirmed in my suspicion, but how could I proceed? Could I tell Lucy I believed her old friend had killed her new friend? Maggie would deny it and where would we go from there? How could I so casually disturb the happy relationship of four decades?

"I think I'll go home," I concluded, "and sleep on the problem. Maybe something will occur to me." I stood up. "Before I go, could I take a look at Roy's room?"

The bedroom Roy had occupied was small—a single bed neatly made up, dresser, bay window with leaded diamond panes through which I saw trees, the front gate, the lonely rubbish bag, and the road. Most of the space along one wall was taken up by an oak wardrobe. I opened the door and discovered it was empty except for a row of wire hangers.

"He took all his clothes," Maggie said.

"That surprises me," Lucy said.

"He was frightened by those Italians," Maggie said. "They threatened him and he fled for his life."

"Maggie," Lucy said, "I don't want to hear any more of that. Not another word."

Her giant companion left us without replying and trudged out of

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sight up a narrow, winding flight of steps leading to the top of the house.

I took my leave, promising to contact Lucy as soon as I had anything else to discuss. The fact that the next disclosure took place before I had left the grounds surprised me as much as it did her.

I walked to the gate, turning once to wave back at Lucy, framed in the lighted doorway. She went inside and closed the door. On this pleasant evening, I decided to walk on down the hill into the lower town, to the monotonous streets with their rows of terraced houses wherein a loser like myself can live in a dingy room for what passes these days as low rent. But before I walked away, my attention was attracted to the solitary rubbish bag bearing Maggie's written plea to the autocratic dustman. It seemed to be spilling its contents halfway down—a wandering cat must have torn a hole to inspect the contents.

My curiosity was no less compulsive than the cat's. I bent in the shadows and saw—Roy Clancy's tweed jacket! I recognized it by the pale leather trim on the cuff. My stomach heaved. Was I about to find my friend's body sectioned and wrapped and packed in this grim black bag? No, thank God. I tore the plastic wide open and out tumbled his clothes, but not their owner.

Let Maggie Murchison explain this phenomenon. Let her try to pin this on Guido.

I rang the front doorbell before Lucy had done anything but turn off a couple of lights. She opened the door, began to speak, then stopped when she saw the jumble of clothing in my arms. "The rest of his things are in the remains of that rubbish bag by the gate," I said. "Clothes, shaving kit, a paperback he must have been reading."

"Maggie," she said.

"Nobody else. Maggie put the bag at the gate. And she told us she saw Roy leave with his things in a suitcase."

"I'll call her down here." Lucy went to the stairwell and produced from her girlish vocal equipment the sort of cry which, decades ago, must have brought her the ball on the hockey field. "Maggie! Will you come down here, please?"

The Murchison woman must have been watching my investigation of the plastic bag from an upstairs window. She came down wearing a cardigan sweater and a scarf knotted over her head and carrying a giant shoulderbag. She had up a head of steam and was well and truly set on course for the front door.

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"I want to talk to you," Lucy said firmly, "about Roy."

"Whatever happened, he brought it on himself." She was at the door.

Allowing her to leave would be a mistake. I went after her and grasped an arm that felt like the limb of a tree. "Hang on a minute," was all I had time to say. She brushed me off as if I were a middle-aged, out-of-shape, non-aggressive sketcher of living-room furniture.

When she was gone, Lucy and I exchanged expressions of futility. "What do we do?" she said. "Call the police?"

"Is that what you want to do to your friend?"

"Not really," she conceded. "But Roy is my friend, too."

"Let's think. We can always bring in the police later." I went into the living room and sat in the chair that was beginning to feel like my own. "Motive," I said. "Does Maggie have a reason for wanting Roy Clancy dead?"

"None that I can think of."

"Let me suggest one," I said. "Jealousy."

"That's silly."

"Is it? Maggie had you all to herself since Darryl died in the war. I'm not suggesting anything sexual. It's friendship—and possession. You've been her responsibility. She looks after you, and this rather splendid house."

My hostess nodded. "I see it now. I meet Roy at the concert, he becomes a visitor, then he's promoted to lodger."

"Which was intrusion enough. Now he and his wife were about to move in permanently. I thought at first Clara Clancy might have done him in to preserve her independence. But it seems it was Maggie."

In the mournful silence that followed this fairly obvious solution to the murder of Roy Clancy, Lucy got up and selected a cassette from her collection. As she inserted it into the machine, she said, "The early music consort of London—tunes from the Fourteenth Century." She pressed the start button. "One of Roy's favorites."

While it played, she poured me a brandy, which I felt disinclined to refuse. Only that morning, I had gone to see my friend, to return his Vivaldi and have my hair cut. Now, scarcely twelve hours later, my hair was hideously styled and my friend was dead.

Shawms, sackbuts, and recorders droned and buzzed through a repetitive melody that was fiercely beautiful. I imagined people just like me listening to this pagan music in cold stone rooms, drunk on

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the conviction that they had reached the limits of human potential. A single drum repeated its triple beat with military precision.

When the track ended, Lucy pressed the stop button. "I can't bear any more just now," she said softly.

I understood. The moment belonged to Roy, and we opened our thoughts to him in a mood of tragic acceptance. Silence prevailed except for the faint rustle of a night breeze from the garden.

Softly, persistently, the beat went on.

It was some little time before I realized I was hearing a thudding like the medieval drum—but from a distance and after the music had ended. I glanced at Lucy. Her eyes widened as she recognized what was happening. "Maggie's room!" she said, getting up fast. "He's there!"

Fast as I could take the stairs, I was half a minute behind Lucy getting to the doorway of the attic room. The door was open, a light switched on. She was bending over a bed upon which lay Roy Clancy, fully dressed, his mouth taped, his wrists tied behind his back, his legs bound at the ankles. One foot had been just able to beat against the wall.

"The gag first," I said. "He must tell us where it hurts before we move him." Lucy peeled away the tape. A bruise darkened one side of his face.

His voice was a croak.

"Where it hurts is everywhere." His last remark before he passed into unconsciousness struck me as reassuring. "You took your bloody time."

The two attendants carrying the stretcher had a struggle maneuvering Roy down the narrow, turning stairway. When they had carried him to the ambulance, the doctor remained to say, "He isn't critical but he soon would have been. Why was he left unattended for so long?"

"There's a crime involved," Lucy said. "I'll be ringing the police."

"I should think so," the doctor said. "When a man sustains a head injury and is denied medical treatment for days, that's cutting it close."

We went back to our brandy, experiencing relief mixed with a certain amount of anger. Roy was going to be all right but he had been put through a shocking experience. We could imagine the scenario. After the party, when Lucy had retired to bed, there must have been an argument. Maggie had struck Roy and injured him.

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Then, lacking the determination to administer the coup de grâce, she had carried him to her room, bound him and gagged him, and left him to die. She couldn't commit the murder, so she decided to wait for death to happen.

"It must have been like that," Lucy agreed. "Shall we ring the police?"

A key turned in the front door. It opened and closed and I tensed my muscles as Maggie Murchison walked heavily down the corridor and entered the room.

"I saw the ambulance. Is he alive?"

"Barely," Lucy said. "Maggie, how could you do it? Bad enough hitting him, but denying him aid—"

"I didn't hit him. He fell on the stairs—drunk. Hit his head on the bannister an awful thump. It looked to me like he was finished."

"Why didn't you call an ambulance?"

"Because—" Maggie sank onto the edge of a chair, elbows on widespread knees, thick wrists dangling. "I thought, just wait. Leave him an hour to expire and everything will be back the way it was. By morning, I told myself, it'll be as if the man never moved in."

"Maggie—"

"I know it was wrong. And when he didn't die, I had no choice. He wasn't tied at first. But I had to bind him the next afternoon when he began to come round. How could I ever explain to you, Lucy, what I had done? If Roy lived, he was going to tell on me."

After a long pause, Lucy said,

"As far as I can remember, you've never done anything but good in all the years we've been together."

The Scottish woman raised her angry eyes. "There should be no medals for that," she said. I sensed something worthwhile between the two women had worn itself out. Then she got up and went to the telephone, picked it up, and dialed 999. "I want the police," Maggie told the operator.

Lucy Hillier-Menzies stood up in court as a character witness on behalf of Maggie Murchison. Maggie, pleading guilty to attempted murder, her Presbyterian soul craving stern punishment, had to settle for a suspended sentence.

My belief was that she would serve life in the big house on the hill, sharing the territory that had been hers alone with the Clancy family from Brighton. But even that form of purgatory was not to be her lot. Clara Clancy not only refused to come to London with

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her husband, but she developed a phlebitis condition which put her in the position of needing domestic help. Maggie volunteered for the job, was accepted, and went south.

I now see my old friend Roy much more frequently than before. We meet at the home of my new friend, Lucy Hillier-Menzies, which is Roy's home now, too. And every once in a while we place a chair in the middle of the kitchen floor where the light is good, Roy gets out his barber kit, and he gives me my traditional short-back-and-sides while Lucy holds up a mirror for my approval.

"Not too much off the top, Roy," I admonish him.

"Shut up," he says, "and listen to the music."

"Q"

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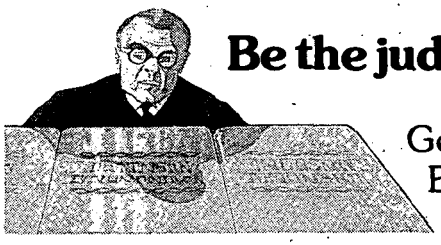

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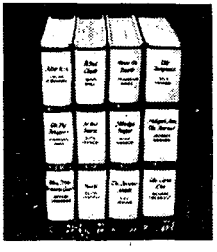

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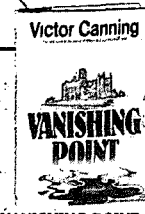


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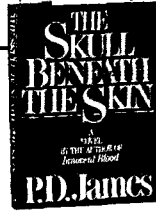


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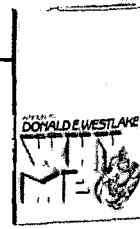


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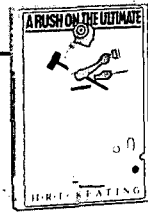


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